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**Understanding Dalit Subalternity in the time of Change: A Case of Mahars in
Rural Maharashtra; India**

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**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of**

MPhil in Development Studies

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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MPhil in Development Studies

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Abstract

Understanding Dalit Subalternity in the time of Change: A Case of Mahars in Maharashtra, India

In this thesis I describe Dalits as 'subalterns' from Gramscian perspective and explain how Dalit politics fits into the idea of subaltern politics. I discuss the concept of 'subaltern social groups' and show it as a relevant lens to understand Dalit subjectivity. In the thesis, by discussing Dalits' awareness of their own subordination at multiple levels, struggles to end their position as subalterns and constant challenges from the dominant caste in systematically breaking their political collectivization, I argue that Dalits are the "prototype" of Gramsci's concept of a 'subaltern social groups'.

Through ethnographic methodology I show how Mahar's- ex-untouchable caste -who are considered to be most political aware and organised in India- continuous everyday 'tactics' are performed to improve their social status. Through the examples of changing agrarian practices and competitive electoral politics at the village level I show that Mahars contribute and strengthen the informal labour unions and local level democracy.

I then argue that these "developments" are insufficient to cease Mahar's historic caste subalternity. Events that carry the image of change and empowerment for Mahars are neither stable nor sustainable. I argue that Mahars along with their political organisation and awareness remain fragmented and their resistance episodic. They although organise themselves politically that might lead to some sudden transformation in their marginalised position. They, however, are continuously broken up and divided through the initiatives of the dominant caste. As a result rendering them to the socio-economic margins of the society.

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

(Re) Thinking Subalternity during 'Social Mobility'

Introduction

In January, the cultivation of grape was over. Atul- a Mahar¹ from Kamtha had invested forty five thousand rupees on his 1.5 acre land to cultivate grapes. His crop however had entirely failed. Over dinner he told me that he had saved money from previous year's profit that he had gained from cultivating onion. He had experimented with a cash crop for the first time and it was a success. This enabled him to reinvest in his land. Encouraged by the success of the onion crop, he decided to cultivate grape for the following year which was a much more expensive crop to cultivate. Risking his last year's entire profit, Atul also borrowed some money from his friends and relatives. Now, when the crop had failed he explained his situation by pointing at the food we were eating together. He said, "today might be the last day of us enjoying chicken and *bhakhri*. From tomorrow we might only eat *bhakhri* and pickle. I will have to find work in the village or outside to eat or if I don't find work, I will sit at home and sleep".

Like Atul, other Mahars who owned marginal land in this village had begun the "risky business" of cultivating crops for the market. In the past, they sowed limited food crops that were used solely for the purpose of subsistence. With increasing confidence among them they had begun to invest in cultivating crops for the market. However, unlike other dominant castes Mahars lack connections in the market, networks for finance, or fallback options in an event of crop failure; in a situation of crop failure they are reduced to an indigent state.

This is a recurring account of many Mahar families, owning marginal land, who in their new acquired confidence aim to transform their material and social conditions through forays into risky ventures of cash crops. Yet, lacking the basic prerequisite to survive and thrive in the market leads them to a situation from which they had desired to escape. This creates a cycle where the realisation of the risk or the lack of it has the capacity of relegating them to a state of extreme poverty or just above it. In such circumstances, most families experience a flexible

¹ A historically marginalized caste group in Maharashtra. Mahars are also one of the most politically active and assertive groups in India. The pioneer of Dalit rights both constitutionally and socially also belonged to the Mahar caste group.

mobility pattern with respect to their incomes thus moving in and out of their indigent state. Despite such failures on a regular basis, Mahars do not cease to negotiate, shape and realign their status vis-à-vis other dominant castes in the village. Such changes in their disposition are a product, as mentioned above, of the new-found confidence that results from political empowerment through constitutional interventions, awareness of historical Dalit struggles in Maharashtra and a culture of sharing stories and memory that helps them to counter dominant narrative of their caste status. The formal equality and empowerment which the constitution guarantees enables Mahars to construct a space of action and a negotiated space of equality. Thus, what is merely formal and codified in the constitution is sought to be realised through constant struggles and demands for recognition and equality in the space of economy and society. In such a struggle, historical memory and oral stories become the site where counter narratives are born that imagine an unmitigated space of equality; so what was hitherto imagined is sought to be actualised in the everyday actions of Mahars.

It is here that the thesis takes its point of entry and departure from the existing account of Dalit politics. Current literature on Dalit assertion stands at two poles. On one end, it is suggested that Dalit assertion has led to a change in the structure of dominance, largely due to increasing participation in electoral processes. This transformation has meant that Dalits are no longer a voiceless entity. But the second pole suggests that Dalits are still subjugated economically and socially; the data on caste violence and the economic status of Dalits stands as testimony to this fact. Both poles in the literature hint in opposite directions and present partial stories. It is at this point that the thesis seeks to make an entry and try to explain this veritable gap between the competing claims made by the two existing narratives on Dalit assertion in India. As a point of departure, the thesis aims to suggest that the two claims rather than being competing present an incomplete picture of the same phenomenon and need to be reconciled to present the complete picture of Dalit assertion. This the thesis seeks to do by studying the socio-political and economic mobility of Mahars - one of the most politically aware and active groups among the Dalits (Reference?). Studying Mahars would be symptomatic, at least in a limited manner, of the direction that Dalit assertion and empowerment is taking in India.

To analyse this phenomenon this thesis employs the Gramscian concept of ‘subalternity’ and ‘subaltern social groups’ as it captures the predicament of Mahars as a social group. The concept of subalternity captures the essence of the assertion and struggle of the Mahars as well as explaining what, at the outset, seems like a contradictory phenomenon of their empowerment and subjugation. In the following section, the thesis will elaborate on the concept of ‘subalternity’ and ‘subaltern social groups’ and show why Mahars constitute a subaltern category.

Understanding Subalternity and Subaltern Social Groups

The notion of subalternity is often used to indicate relations of class, lack of political organisation and representation or the historical positions of those of "the inferior rank" especially in the post colonial context (Spivak, 1987;1992; Arnold, 1984; Brennan, 2001; 2006). This understanding of the concept of subaltern, that was accredited to the writings of Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks, has recently come under severe academic examination. New writings on Gramsci's body of work that have attempted to translate and interpret *the subaltern* reveal a growing critical rethinking of the concept especially from two standpoints. One, that it is excessively limiting to interpret subaltern just in terms of class relations. Green (2011, 2013), Buttigieg (1992), Zene (2000, 2011) argue that subaltern was not merely a euphemism in the writings of Gramsci owing to the prison censorship. It was in-fact an independent concept that interested Gramsci along with other concepts such as hegemony, in his overall enquiry into Italian history, politics, culture and the relation between state and civil society (Green, 2011). Second, in continuity with the previous point, in an effort to re-engage with the Gramscian conception of the subaltern and subalternism, Buttigieg (2011:302) claim that Gramsci's work has been a ‘work in progress’, which needs constant interpretation and patient reading without predilections or ideological bias.

Thus, Green (2011) emphatically argues, although class relation was an important base for Gramsci to systematically understand domination and subordination in society, his concept of subaltern and subalternity are not solely guided by an orthodox Marxist category based on class hierarchy. Like Brennan (2001), Beverly (1999) and others, he too agrees that in certain

instances Gramsci camouflages his Marxist writing in the prison, he nevertheless refutes that subaltern was only a euphemism for the Proletariat. For Gramsci, according to Green (2002, 2011, 2011a), subordination was not limited to a single relation i.e. class but rather subalternity is conceived as an intersectionality of many identities such as gender, religion, race, nationality etc. that functioned within a particular social, economic and political context. As there is no precise definition of subaltern groups, the depth and complexity of the term, he claims, only surfaces when it is extrapolated from the ways in which Gramsci incorporates it to understand exclusion and marginalisation from varied aspects such as gender, race, class, etc. For instance, discussing the role of identity and otherness in the relation of domination and subordination Gramsci mentions (quoted from Green, 2011:395): “Often the subaltern groups are originally of other races (other cultures and other religions) of the dominant groups and often they are a concoction of various races, like in the case of the slaves”. Thus, incorporating the aspect of identity based on race which is the “other” in relation to the dominant group, it is displayed that exclusion in the concept of subalternity is not only based on class terms.

Thus, subaltern does not simply refer to a class position or a precise kind of marginality (unorganised and unrepresented) but a concept that examines the terms of social and political relations between different groups in a society and what capacity each group exerts to determine, continue or alter terms of such relations. Thus, until a group succeeds in transforming the terms of social and political relations that cause their marginalisation they continue to be subaltern to the other group (s) (Green, 2011). As a result, subaltern group's consciousness of their social position and their organisation that leads to political struggle is part of a 'phased development' which are not in Gramsci's perspective sufficient conditions to cease relations of subordination. In this vein, Zene (2011) defines Dalits² as “the real subaltern in Gramscian terms” (2011:95). He reflects that Dalit's efforts to overturn prevailing dehumanising relations of caste springs out from their description of the self as a ‘Dalit’ which means broken down or trampled upon. Such self-designated position shows the awareness of the oppression/humiliation (Guru, 2009) they

² The 1950 Constitution of India criminalised Caste based discrimination and referred to people who belonged to the lowest social strata as ‘Scheduled Caste’. ‘Since the 1970's however, active SCs have called themselves ‘Dalits’ (downtrodden) in the spirit of pride and militancy’ (Gorringe and Rafanell, 2007:112).

have to endure. While at the same time adoption of such an identity creatively transforms a negative description into a confrontational identity from which they begin to challenge unequal relations of caste. Rao (2001:1) describes this as “the terms of exclusion on which discrimination is premised are at once refused and reproduced in the demands for inclusion”, thus, converting a negative description within the caste structure into a positive political value. Today, more than ever, the Dalits in India are able to express their resistance to socio-cultural, economic and political forms of discrimination at the national as well as local levels. Such resistance has emerged in the forms of movements (Gorringe, 2005, Robb, 1993, Omvedt, 2006), literary publications (Moon, 2002; Rege, 2006; Beth, 2007), political organisations and parties (Jaffrelot, 2003; Guru, 1995; Pai, 2002) as well as in other forms such as songs and films. Manor (2012) argues that caste hierarchy is increasingly transforming into what he calls a caste 'difference'. For him, in rural India, where caste hierarchies were found to be most rigid, they are now losing control over the thinking and actions of Dalits. Similarly, Shah (2012), agreeing with Manor, says that the term caste is used today mostly in the context of assertion by the 'backward castes' and Dalits against deprivation and social injustice. For him, caste has lost its ritual hierarchy amidst frequent and competitive electoral processes. Instead it now denotes social identity in terms of power relationships more than ritual hierarchy. Other studies also illustrate how Dalits have "defied the odds" and are a rising force as entrepreneurs in India. Kumar et al (2006) argue that 'Dalits are microcosm of large historical change where dehumanising social system is slowly but surely giving away'. For them these changes are epochal. These studies point at a transformation where Dalits are not perceived as a voiceless entity anymore. Such studies stand in contrast and evidence a change in comparison to the studies based in colonial and post colonial rural India where their marginality was akin to their lack of representation in any significant form.

Although fervent in their attempts to reject and overcome their 'lower social status' (Gorringe, 2010), Dalits have continuously found themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder³ as well as at the receiving end of the dominant caste violence.

³National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector 2007. Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector. Pp. 8 and 114

In contrast to the progress described in the aforementioned studies several critical works on Dalit's interaction with the modern Indian state do not share their optimism. Prakash (2010) for instance shows the resourcefulness of Dalit entrepreneurship along with the grave institutional and political obstacles they face due to their caste identity. Their analysis draws from the detailed interviews of several Dalit entrepreneurs which leads them to the conclusion that marginalised social groups like Dalits face adverse inclusion in the market where 'caste as an ideology (within the market)...- nurtures - rather than dissolves - discriminatory attitudes and behaviour by upper castes against Dalits.

Similarly, those studies that do find changes in the relations of dominance and subordination between landed class and rural labours question its sustainability. They conclude that in the absence of any “permanent” mechanism these changes can easily be reversed. Thus they do not lead to any “real” empowerment. Jha (2004), through his long-term comparative study of rural labour in Bihar shared their argument that the traditional order of coercion and oppression was ‘dented very seriously’ (ibid: 531) in his study of villages. He pointed out that migration and poverty alleviation programmes of the government were the two most significant factors that contributed to changing social conditions for Dalit labours in the village. This was highlighted by the fact that few Dalit households benefitted in some form of capital such as livestock through the Government’s programmes, while at the same time out migration remained as the most important source of income. However, he concludes his study by questioning the sustainability of these changes. He argues that the continuity of a high prevalence of surplus labour and disguised unemployment has resulted in only a marginal increase in labour wages over a decade, while he doubts the continuity of government programmes with the ascendancy of the neoliberal agenda of the Government. These changes he claims are unsustainable mechanisms that will not fundamentally change the subalternity of the rural labour.

Supporting this view, Heyer (2010) focuses on the economic aspects of the caste institution. She argues that collective action from above uses traditional institutions like caste for Dalit subordination in rural economy. Through her longitudinal study of Dalit labours in rural Tamil Nadu, she argues that neither modernization of agriculture nor industrialization or urbanization

Out of 36 per cent of the total casual labourers in the agriculture sector, 19.7 per cent were landless and the rest of the agricultural labourers had sub marginal holdings of up to 0.4 hectares (MoF, 2007:15).

has led to any significant changes in the lives of the Dalit labours. This is primarily because Dalit labours still lack access to land and other forms of capital. Their mobility outside the low paid agriculture labour work is extremely limited. Even with some education, members of younger generation could not access opportunities in urban areas and diversify their livelihood sources as their caste affiliation and connections were relatively much weaker. On the contrary, dominant caste farmers and other caste Hindu labours could access newer economic opportunities in rural as well as urban areas, given their important caste and kin connections and relevant economic and social capital. As a result, these rural labours that belong to the most marginalized caste groups find themselves in the most precarious and vulnerable situation where in the future, as Heyer (2010: 243) predicts, "...their relative position [will] continu[e] to deteriorate, unless they can mobilize effectively to force changes that are more favourable from their point of view".

How do we then understand the location of Dalits in Present modern day India?

As the discussion above shows, studies on caste relations and resistance have been evolving and point in several directions. Jodhka (2012) asks the timely question, 'What [...] is specific about the current moment of caste and how could we best describe it? Is there anything different about the way we talk about caste today when compared to, say, the early 1950s or even 1970s? and ' [Have] reservations [affirmative action] outlived their role?' These two questions in conjugation point at the crossroads at which caste studies have led with their either/or approach. Such studies bring about a great deal of analyses on how the "progress" or lack of it thereof in Dalit's social, economic and political circumstances should be understood. However, they fail to analyse and explain the simultaneity in which Dalit's everyday lived experiences exist. For instance, how should we understand the rising Dalit movements both political and social across India and yet a continuity in their experiences of untouchability (Gorringe, 2005, 2009; Jeffrey, 2010, Jeffrey et al 2008)? Such contradictory co-existence of changes and continuities in the relations of caste demand explanation.

In order to fill this academic gap my research employs Gramsci's concept of the subaltern. By taking the case of Mahars in rural Maharashtra, I highlight how one of the most politically aware

and united ex-untouchable caste (Zelliot, 1970) suffers and contests caste marginality on an everyday basis. I examine the role of intersectionality of various identities (class, region, gender, political affiliations, education etc.) in its variation within an ensemble Socio-political and economic relations that create continuity in Dalit's status of subalternity. Another important aspect in understanding the nature of subaltern groups from a Gramscian perspective is their political organization. For Gramsci, subaltern groups are not necessarily disorganized and lacking in any kind of representation. They can in fact possess some level of political organization without any sudden or immediate transformation in their relations of subordination and marginalisation. This is mainly because collective unity and political organization among them remains few and far between but, as importantly, they also face the continuous threat of breaking up through the initiatives of the dominant group. Thus Gramsci (note-book 25, § 2; 1971: 55) wrote:

“There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups; it therefore can only be demonstrated when an historical cycle is completed and this cycle culminates in a success”.

Buttigieg (2011) explains that fragmentation forms the ‘essential nature’ (ibid: 36) of subaltern groups. He asserts that instead of understanding these groups as homogenous blocks, they should be understood as different groups in a position of subalternity with varying levels of political organization with respect to the hegemonic cohesive structure. At the same time, within a single subaltern group varying degrees of marginality can also be found. Unity and connectedness of these variant groups is often fickle and hence easier to disintegrate at the behest of the dominant group. As a result, their resistance against a hegemonic power remains “necessarily fragmented and episodic”. Zene (2010) claims that even these episodic challenges to the hegemonic power need to be carefully recorded. Evoking Gramsci, he argues these “traces” of resistance that are often subtle and undeclared are significant examples that display subaltern group’s consciousness of their subordination and willingness to overcome it. These instances of resistance also challenge the all-pervasive hegemony that builds its strength through juxtaposing socio-cultural justification of a dominant culture or rule, political exclusion and dominance.

Subaltern's Forms of Resistance

Symbols, myth and stories of the past

Zene (2010) argues, 'lower' castes speak of their subalternity. They do not consent to their own marginalisation as is the case under 'hegemony', instead they resist and struggle against a coercive domination (Raheja, 1998; Deliege, 1992; Mosse, 1994; Karnath, 2004). Zene (ibid) further observes that Dalit movements have progressed much beyond the stage of "awareness" of their oppression. Instead there is a greater mobilisation of this awareness to become a 'transforming agent' (ibid: 96) of their subalternity. This is expressed in ways such as: 'folklore, popular religiousity, so called superstitions, tales and myths, theatre, proverbs...poems, music, detailed monographs discussing their experiences' (ibid: 91, 95) and in many other forms.

In his book *Women, Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India*, Narayan (2006) examines how Dalit groups counter the hegemonic Brahminical cultural code to create their identity in a new way that refuses caste stigma. This he says is done through the 'new narratives' of Dalit politics (ibid: 40) that are expressed through cultural and social symbols which evoke dissent against caste dominance and oppression. He says:

"...the Brahminical mode of composing, defining and interpreting history, culture and stories became the basis of the formation of narratives [that were] loaded with Brahminical values, ritual stories and songs. Through this Brahmins created...a normative frame of reference by which the Dalits were accorded an inferior position. To counter such oppressive historical constructions, the subaltern groups have continuously engaged in communicating their own stories...They have also constructed a plethora of symbols which are used as tools for empowerment in response to the urge to acquire self-respect. This is not merely to deliver oral accounts or to construct a genealogy of lands and events but to restore order in the world as perceived by them."

This research therefore adopts a perspective which, following Gramsci's concept of 'subalternity', considers Dalit's "tactics of dissent"⁴ in their local and informal forms as one of

⁴Zene (2010) distinguishes between 'strategies' and 'tactics' of power. According to him, those groups that find themselves at the margins of history and society, often use tactics, meaning (local and immediate) ways of challenging their marginalisation. This is distinctly different from the "strategies" of power that systematically reproduce the hegemonic culture.

the most significant ways in which subaltern politics shapes itself in challenging the dominant caste hegemony. It would be hard, in fact, to disagree with the argument that Dalits in overt and subtle forms have been opposing caste dominance and their marginalisation over a long period of time.

However, several early village based ethnographic studies claimed untouchable communities agreed to their own exclusion and marginalisation. This argument was based on two forms of replication. One, that the untouchable communities replicate the caste order by dividing several untouchable castes hierarchically and behave towards each other just as the higher castes do. Also, that each untouchable castes are internally divided into sub castes, this Moffat (1979) argued was the apparent example which showed untouchable communities were in complete consensus with the caste order that defines them as fundamentally low. Two, it was argued that these groups also replicate the caste values, religious deities and beliefs that are similar with the religious practices of the 'upper' caste groups. These studies examined that either untouchable communities participated in the religious functions from the margins in instances where they were allowed partially or reproduced such religious practices for themselves if they were kept outside from it through the notion of pollution. Thus, by replicating caste relations and practices among themselves they live in consensus with the caste system from which they have been excluded or included at the margins by the upper caste.

After having been considered for years as an important analysis of untouchable's position within caste system, such studies came under severe criticism from the subsequent ethnographic studies for its claim on the alleged relationship between replication and consensus (Raheja, 1988; Deliege, 1992 and 1994; Mosse, 1994; Karnath, 2004). The "replication-consensus" paradigm, as has been observed, did not distinguish between an ideal and an actual practice (Deliege, 1992). As Deliege (ibid.) observes such studies did not probe sufficiently enough into the difference between what was being told to the ethnographer and the actual behavior and practices of the people. Calling it a 'structuralist approach', Mosse (1985:261) refuses it by stating that such an approach to understand caste relations mostly considered "an implicit ideology...to generate practice in an unmediated way" (ibid). In fact, Mayaram (2006) argues, marginality is also a

source of power and resistance as it is of subjugation and powerlessness. Subordinate groups' practices as discussed by Karnath and others show that even those instances that appear similar to the practices of the 'upper' caste should not be interpreted as replication in its entirety. In fact, these "replicated" practices contain the grains of dissent, which are practiced to challenge the given lower social status of Dalits and also at times to organise themselves as a group or community. These "replicated practices" of the Dalits do not necessarily imbibe the upper caste's philosophy, goals and objectives around such practices.

Besides similarities of religious practices and differences in their meaning, Dalit resistance also emerges at the 'interface of memory and imagination' (Mayaram, 2006:14). Memory functions as the vehicle for dissenting values and cultures resulting from the experiences of the Dalit groups, while imagination re-presents Dalit history and memory which is separate and unlike the conventional academic approach to history. Dalit stories of past are not necessarily linear, chronologically arranged, based on the 'positivistic notions of the past' (Davies, 2003:5,). Instead they emerge from the living history of the community, where the stories, its context and characters reveal how Dalits make sense of social inequality and their ambition and urge for the reconstruction of the identity of their community. Thus, presentation of past through Dalit historiography is also a reflection of their oppressive present and of their desired future. These stories as narrated by Dalit and other marginal communities invert the dominant categories and their narratives by posing counter narratives of the past premised on their experiences. Narayan (2006) observes that the central significance of the "idea of truth" and "reality" in historical representation of events are not the guiding principles for the narration of the past by Dalit communities, neither should it be understood from these rigid perspectives. Instead, as he explains, most often in Dalit stories the distinction between myth and verifiable facts get blurred, as these stories are a medium of coping with the oppressive present and simultaneously of identity assertion. Thus, a significant aspect in Dalit's narration of their past is that 'the past' is a constitutive and an integral element in their struggle for carving equal space in the unequal power structure of society and the state. In macro politics of historiography Chakrabarty (2003) identifies, history as proposed by Dalits is grossly different from the professional academic history. In fact, he argues that the efforts of the marginalized groups like Dalits in carving a more

dignified future for themselves through a re-imagination of their past has substantially pushed the boundaries of history as knowledge and hence has led to the democratization of the discipline. The medium of symbols has played an equally important role in politicizing caste relations and actively challenging the dominant cultural discourse.

In one section of this research I therefore look at undefined forms of protest by the Dalits. In this case Dalit politics often remains silent in defining a permanent opponent. In their struggle to gain economic mobility and social dignity and respect, their politics does not allow them to rely on a single source to transform their status of subalternity. In fact, their politics weaves the historical, social, political and economic capital together to challenge the caste domination and at the same time present themselves with the possibility of a dignified future.

Subaltern Politics through Electoral Politics

Waghmore (2013) claims that there is a need to revisit these movements not from a macro perspective to evaluate them as success or failure, but to understand its everyday functioning and ways in which it continues to shape Dalit politics and dissent.

Taking a cue from Waghmore's claim, I argue that beyond the organised Dalit movements, where its history, trajectory, changes in leadership, movement/party splits etc. can be systematically traced and documented to present the "visible" face of Dalit politics and protest. There lies a more micro collectivization of Dalit masses who are not active "registered" members of such movements and organizations. But they nevertheless powerfully shape the discourse of Dalit dissent in their own local specific settings. They engage with the state institutions as scheduled castes (SC) - a legal identity, premised upon their position as equal but vulnerable citizens who require state protection (Rao, 2010), while their disengagement with the state occurs when they find state machinery being unresponsive or even repressive. It is often during these disengagements that Scheduled caste population turns to local Dalit organizations or collectivise themselves inspired by these movements and organisations. Thus, the politics of Dalit masses takes recourse in state and non-state organizations simultaneously and presents their own independent approach to challenge caste domination and their socio-economic exclusion.

Their collectivization often only takes concrete visible forms over certain issues (mostly caste fights and violence in their locality) and occasions (state elections and celebrations such as Ambedkar Jayanti), which otherwise remains dispersed. Their everyday resistance and politics is not as covert and unorganized as those subordinate groups in Scott's (1985) study. However, their identity as subalterns lies in the fact that their efforts of collectivization are shrewdly blocked and their groups split by the efforts of the local dominant castes.

The convergence of state given identity i.e. SC and a confrontational radical identity i.e. Dalit, collectively enables the non-party/non-movement 'lower' caste subaltern groups in forming a community for themselves and further challenging the 'upper' caste dominance in social, economic and political spheres collectively. In the process of electoral politics in a village setting this convergence of different Dalit identities is most visible. Dalits' efforts to collectivise and challenge dominant caste in the local politics is facilitated through state's affirmative action policies as well as through their collective mobilisation informed and inspired by larger Dalit movements against the dominant caste.

Subaltern politics through economic means

The unequal power relationship of landed dominant castes and Dalit labours signified a differentiation that was much more nuanced than an outright absence of ownership of factors of production among the Dalits. Differences in area of habitation, food practices, means of transportation, grooming habits as well as leisure time are practices that are not exclusively economic but are enforced in combination with the socio-cultural discrimination based on caste for instance, severe proscriptions were imposed on Dalits in the matter of food and attire by the 'upper' caste. As Zelliott notes that upper castes in Maharashtra historically have had specific rules for different "lower" castes in the matter of things that they could access, acquire and consume (Chapter 3). In continuation with the variations of these differences, caste distance (hierarchical) is maintained by the continuous process of reinforcing and guarding the "exclusive" practices of the upper caste that marks their social status. Gorringer and Rafanille (2010) in this context conclude that the body is not only a symbol of caste difference but further a means through which such differences are constituted and practiced.

Khamis et al (2012), therefore point out, spending on consumption items that have signalling value in social interactions across groups with distinctive social identities can be a form of active resistance. But even in the absence of such intent it creates a political effect. As Sivaramakrishnan and Gidwani (2008: 199) eloquently put it, "...the charged signification of "modern" consumer goods may have the capacity to counteract social norms predicated upon religious and patriarchal ideologies...consumption can offer new sources of social distinction and status, and even supply the semiotic elements for the counter hegemonic vocabulary".

Changing forms of consumption, and particularly of rural Dalit consumption, has been conceptualised as an "indirect dissent". Bhan et al (2010), argue, social indignity and material poverty are intertwined but to understand the previous as the self evident consequence of the latter brings about the 'incompleteness in the picture' (ibid: 40) of rural caste relations. Focusing on the changing pattern of consumption among the Dalits, they share that it has led to a faster advancement of their "social" well being than material well being.

In the context of the above discussion, in this study, I will show how through direct and indirect ways Dalits contest their marginality. I will also discuss how Dalit's conscious contestation of their marginality and a continuity in their experiences of caste based discrimination contributes to our understanding of the creation of subalternity even in circumstances that might appear to be progressive.

Historical Background (Mahars as Dalits)

The role of the state since ancient and medieval times in India has been a prominent factor in establishing, maintaining and restoring caste relations at the village level. Although attached to a religion i.e. Hinduism, historical records of states under Hindu and non-Hindu rulers show that they actively maintained the caste order. Fukuzawa's (1968) work on state and caste relations in the eighteenth century Maratha rule in the Deccan extensively discusses the centrality of the state in determining fundamental aspects of caste system like resolving internal disputes relating to caste practices, splitting a caste group into sub castes and formulating and enforcing the code of behaviour and ranking of various caste groups. He concludes by saying the caste order was "not

only a spontaneous social order of the people but also a state order of society controlled and protected by the state” (Fukazawa, 1968:33).

Such strict practice of caste code and its implementation by the state, interestingly, opened spaces for negotiation for some caste groups to claim a higher position in the hierarchical order of the caste system. The category of Maratha which stands as a bounded caste group today is an important example here to indicate the discursive and relatively flexible process through which caste and class categories enmeshed. It also highlights the state’s need and ability for a ritual recognition over their temporal claims. Marathas as a collective identity emerged in Shivaji’s time in the seventeenth century. A collection of ninety six local elite families who had found avenues for social mobility through civil and military employment under the Mughal rule in the Deccan, claimed Rajput ancestry - and their descent from the Kshatriya family (Deshpande, 2004). However, Shivaji’s coronation in 1674 through vedic rituals, faced opposition from the local Brahmins who disputed his claim of his origin from the twice born Kshatriya lineage. Vedic rituals were strictly reserved for the twice born Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, whereas the local Brahmins claimed that Shivaji belonged to the lowly family of Patils (village headman). It is however noteworthy that with the consolidation of Shivaji’s political power over Deccan that established the Maratha political sovereignty, they could persuade Brahmins from Banaras to find Shivaji’s lineage to Kshatriya ancestry (ibid.). Thus, Shivaji was belatedly coronated as a Chatrapati - a dignified great king. However, for the lowest section, such mobility within the structure of caste hierarchy did not happen. The Maratha state continued to appoint Brahmin Peshwa or prime minister under their rule that gave the Brahmin community a political visibility. By 1749 Brahmin Peshwa had become the de-facto ruler of Maratha kingdom. The transfer of power to the Brahmin Peshwa furthermore brought the centrality of caste to political and administrative affairs of the state.

In resolving caste disputes or accusations against an individual or a group of not following the caste code, the Maratha state often consulted its ministers, witnesses and representatives of Brahmin priests from various Hindu holy places (Fukazawa, 1968). Accounts in Fukazawa’s study highlighted the maintenance of caste order as an important administrative function of the state. Elaborating on this he gives an account of an ‘untouchable’ hamlet near the upper caste houses. In 1784 under the seventh Peshwa of Maratha rule, seven rules of worship for the

untouchables and the geographical location of their hamlet were issued. The notice read that the untouchable hamlet was located too close to the village (upper caste location) and needed to be demolished. The state then built them a new hamlet in another place by giving them a certain amount of money and timber. Similarly for the rules of worshiping, in an area called Pandharpur, the temple of a fourteenth century saint Chokhamela who Mahars and other untouchable castes worshiped was adjacent to a caste Hindu temple. When this was brought to the notice of the government, they instructed the local bureaucrat saying:

“The place is so narrow and crowded that the visitors are touched to one another and the Brahmins are opposed to this. Therefore the untouchables should perform worship from near the stone lamp of the image of chokhamela or from a nearby untouchable hamlet. They should not approach the temple. Those who do shall be punished.” (ibid: 42-43)

Unlike Marathas, who could create space for altering their caste (social) status through their political power, Mahars in the same area belonged to the set of 12 village servants, barahbalutedar, who were far removed from political power and were bound to perform menial jobs as designated to their caste status. As a village servant Mahars' role, obligations and remuneration were strictly defined. They were to perform duties for the village and work as watchmen, servants of government officials, caretakers of the burning ground, removing dead animal carcasses, repairing and maintaining the village boundary, etc. For these hereditary services, remunerations (balute) were paid generally in kind at the two harvest seasons of the year, in the form of fixed amount of grain for each balutedari (village servant) caste. The payment of the customary share in the form of grain to each category of balutedars was known as batai (Raychaudhuri and Kumar, 1982). The other kind of remuneration given to Mahars was a small plot of land. This land was further classified into two categories, namely Maharki also known as watan land, which was given by the state for performing government duties like fixing village borders, tracking thieves etc. The other category of land was called Hadola Hadki, where Mahars were assigned land for the services that they gave to the village community (ibid). These services generally included inferior and stigmatized work such as removing and skinning dead cattle from the village. The third kind of payment “allowed” to the Mahars was called *haq* in

which socially degraded “gifts” such as the clothes of corpses, leftover food and other *haq* like collection of leftover grains from the ground during any religious ceremony were only to be done by the Mahars (ibid). These services and its remuneration to the Mahars and other caste groups were regularly monitored and disciplined by the state in consultation with the Brahmins of the village.

Such reinforcement of a groups’ caste status by the state had several implications on the identity and mobility of different caste groups. It blended the ritual and political power in a way that established the Brahmanical hegemony. Caste could then be the material structure of exclusive privileges and exploitation. The caste disciplining by the state through Brahmanical knowledge produced exclusive power that did not allow many and regular avenues of challenges to it, especially within the structure. One of the many challenges of this exclusive power for the untouchable caste was their inability to access the public space.

By the 19th century however the control of the state over the caste matters had loosened. The Peshwas were defeated by the East India Company in 1818. In the following years even though Brahmanical knowledge played a significant role in colonial knowledge formation, the colonial government did not take interest in mediating caste matters regarding ritual status and religious rights (Rao, 2009). As an effect of this Mahars access to the modern institutions like schools, law courts, hospitals etc. and opportunity to find work outside their ritual duties like in railways and British army became a possibility (ibid.). In the nineteenth century Mahars formed a visible group unity outside the village especially in railway workers group and dock labour. Through their work in the British houses, they were introduced to the English language and a different way of life. The new occupations outside the village encouraged Mahars towards education that became reason for disputes at village level between Mahars and ‘higher’ caste, when old caste order were challenged (Zelliot, 1969). It is in this context that Zelliot (ibid:1) says “Between 1890 and 1956, the Mahar caste of Maharashtra experienced a political awakening, a development of unity and a push for equal rights with higher castes which mark the caste out as unique among untouchable groups”. This political awakening created an alternative ‘non-Brahmin public space’ (Rao, 2009:39) that appealed for equality and dignity of the Mahars and other untouchables. Jotirao Phule a Mahar social reformist and a political activist of the late

nineteenth century established Satyashodak Samaj (Truth Seeking Society) in 1873. Through this platform he attacked the Brahmanical hegemony and sought to build a collective distinct identity opposed to the Brahminical identity of all untouchables groups. Phule challenged the Brahmanical dominance by invoking the question of rationality in Hindu practices. The other tenant on which he challenged the Hindu religious practices was of equality. Identifying denial of education and practice of untouchability as the main source of continuous marginalisation of the untouchables, he attacked Hinduism as a religion of inequality (Omvedt, 1971). Print media was another early medium of colonial institutions through which Mahars had begun to register their protest. The first Mahar document to publicly critique the inherent disadvantages of caste systems was an article published in a Bombay newspaper, *Indu Prakash* by Baba Walangkar in 1890 (Zelliot, 1969).

The colonial state engaged itself in a contradictory position with caste and caste customs and categories. The untouchable communities under new colonial government could socially mobilize themselves through their access to modern institutions and employment opportunities. Such access allowed them to form a distinct caste identity and to challenge the dominance of the upper caste. However, at the same time the colonial government and law courts strengthened the idea of caste segregation by interpreting exclusive rights to a particular space through the idea of right to private property. One such case that highlights this paradoxical situation was Dalits' Satyagraha to access public water tank in the town of Mahad under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar in 1927. After several months of violence and caste riots the colonial court decided the case in the favour of Dalits. However, the interpretation of their demand was not based against the discriminative privileges of caste hierarchy. But the failure of the caste Hindus- who opposed Mahars access to the tank- to demonstrate that the tank was part of the nearby Hindu temple. The two judges in the case agreed that if caste Hindus could have had a convincing case if they had proved that the tank like temple was part of a sacred space, where ritually Mahars and other untouchable castes were not allowed to enter. The extension of temple as an exclusive space for caste Hindu to the tank could have brought the judgment in the favour of the caste Hindus (Rao, 2009).

Dalit struggles against inequality and discrimination since the colonial period has been marked by such contradictions. These contradictions have nevertheless positioned Dalits in a unique context from where they influence and transform the notions of social justice, equality, citizenship and rights. It is only through an understanding of the context and the history that they have been placed into that we can make sense of the current political engagements of the Dalits and especially Mahars in Maharashtra. Rather than accepting terms of their subjugation Mahars have continuously sought to negotiate their terms of engagement and influence the political discourse by challenging its inegalitarian ethos. It is this historical memory of the long drawn out struggle that populates the imagination and the memory of the countless Mahar families that are waging their struggle for better lives. A deep self-understanding of their own history, along with memories of long drawn out struggles against caste hierarchy makes Mahars one of the most assertive political groups in India that seeks to negotiate with in-egalitarian caste structures on an everyday basis. A study into their history and their everyday politics would then be symptomatic of the future possibilities and contours of Dalit democratic politics.

An understanding of Mahar history also opens up the window to peek into their new-found confidence to deal with an unequal social and economic structure and their political awareness to assert their rights. It is this history of continuous struggle that also opens up space for an alternate imagination that is known to be possible and can be pursued. This thesis will delve into the countless tools of history, myth making, memory, and oral narratives that Mahars resort to in order to reimagine their past and assert a different future. This will aid in understanding and locating the multiple sites of struggle, the tools used, the frustrations, the failures, the tools, techniques, attitudes summoned upon to bounce back.

Methodology

The main site of my fieldwork was Kamtha a village in Osmanabad district which falls within the larger region of Marathwada in Southern Maharashtra. The nearest town to Kamtha is Tuljapur at a distance of 5kms. Kamtha is connected with Tuljapur by a metalled road with numerous modes of transportation like buses, and auto-ricksha. Tuljapur is a center of economic activity drawing people from villages around who seek casual employment. The nearest train

station from Tuljapur is Osmanabad (25kms) and Solapur. Tulajpur is well-connected with Osmanabad and Solapur with frequent buses plying between the centres. Due to its location and its growing importance as a religious centre Tuljapur is developing fast as a peri-urban centre. It is the location for massive construction activities that attracts a large scale workforce from the surrounding villages, including Kamtha. Numerous other casual work opportunities like cleaning, helpers, are also available apart from other daily wage earning opportunities. Tuljapur, in recent years, has acquired a reputation as a major religious hub due to the growing importance of the Tulja Bhawani temple that is the seat of the local deity Bhawani. This has invited hordes of pilgrims from around the city as well as from far off especially during the navratri celebrations every year during September-October. Pilgrims coming to the temple are from around Maharashtra and the neighbouring states of Karnataka, Telengana, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. Such a surge in religious tourism has also invited infrastructure development by the local corporations and state bodies. Religious tourism has brought in job opportunity for the locals in form of flower shops, devotional shops that offer items as offering for gods, souvenir shops, and local tourism industry that caters to the increasing influx of pilgrims.

Kamtha

Kamtha is a small village with 237 households. The caste composition of the village constituted majority of Marathas - a dominant landed caste which was recently (2015) declared as an Other Backward Caste⁵ and Mahars- a scheduled caste⁶. Other caste households in the village were of Chambhar, Maang, Mali and Kumbhar. Few households belonged to the tribal group Pardhi and there were few Muslim households.

Caste /Religious Groups in the village		Number of Households
1.	Maratha	94

⁵OBC- A collective term used by the government of India to classify castes which are socially and economically backward.

⁶SC- A constitutional category used for the sets of castes across India who have been recognized as historically marginalized and subjugated within the Caste hierarchy and order in India

2.	Mahar	92
3.	Mali	24
4.	Muslim	16
5.	Pardhee	6
6.	Maang	4
7.	Kumbhar	1

I conducted my fieldwork in Kamtha from September 2011 to September 2012. Initially for the first four months I stayed with a Mahar family (Atul Rokade's family) in Ambachishet (literally translated as Amba's land)⁷. I was familiar with the village and Atul's family due to my field work during my MA and through later research work post my Masters degree. During my M.A I had visited the village for a month as part of the course (rural practicum) and stayed for a month. Subsequently my research work post MA was regarding conducting a household survey- to understand the levels of education and employment- in the village. . Due to my continuous engagement with in Kamtha I had developed a familiarity with the families here and vice-versa.

During my subsequent visits to Kamtha a plethora of issues emerged which could not be explained through the limited exposure I had and the constraints of the questions that we were seeking to answer. Some of my research questions emerged during my rural practicum which demanded us to stay only for a month and during which I had in-depth discussions with numerous families in the village. It was at this time, I became aware of the severe economic and social distress that Mahar families encountered on a daily basis. My experience exposed me to the complex economic relations within and outside the village. Economically Mahars had two main options for employability: migration or to be dependent on the landed Marathas for work. In such a scenario Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) seemed to be an effective intervention. MGNREGA was a central government Act, that provided the right to work to anyone who demanded it in a rural area for a hundred days with minimum wages that were often higher than the existing labour rates in villages. This, it was commonly argued, could potentially transform the existing caste dynamics in the village; especially in the context of Dalit labourers who often are landless and dependent on landed castes for work.

⁷Ambachishet has been explained in chapter 2

This led me to propose a research study of Mahar participation in MGNREGA in Kamtha. However, from the outset of my fieldwork, it started to emerge that Mahars in this village were not participating in the scheme even though they continuously staked claim in other government schemes where they were the designated beneficiary. This opened up a contradiction to me that demanded explanation and further research. It led me to ask how Mahars perceive themselves vis-a-vis their economic and social self. The fact that they were denying the upper caste narrative about themselves did not necessarily entail that they completely bought into the government narrative that claimed them to be a beneficiary. It highlighted that rather than being passive beneficiaries of the government schemes there was an awareness of being active citizens who were aware of their own needs and who could shape their own narratives with respect to the state. In fact, as the field work progressed it became apparent that Mahars considered themselves in continuous engagement with the state whereby not all that the state offered could be accepted rather it was open for continuous negotiation, change, or rejection. For example, while they accepted some of the social schemes regarding housing, Public Distribution System (PDS), they rejected MGNREGA. This pointed towards an enhanced level of self-awareness and political consciousness much beyond those framed within a statist narrative. In the available analysis of MGNREGA the fact that rejection can also be an active tool of participation was missing. This phenomenon demanded explanation as Mahars in this village manifested similar active engagement in other economic, social, and political spheres in order to strengthen their position, both individually as well as a group. This led me to think that despite their economic situations and hardships that they face the fact of choice regarding their employment was a crucial factor for the Mahars. Rather than being seen as a passive recipient they seemed to engage and choose their terms of engagement. This was despite their conditions of deprivation. At this point, then, it became important to understand the conditions that governed the acts of their choice, especially given their own precarious material positions. It is at this level that I perceived a shift from the initial proposed research. Questions of participation became more complicated when understood from the point of the view of the participant and the conditions they operate under. Here it became important to understand the location and the sites of engagement and the reasons and terms governing it rather than the mere practice of engaging. This demanded a more intricate analysis of Mahars as a social group that despite its conditions of

deprivation and repeated failures seeks to actively engage politically and transform their condition. It is at this point that the current thesis provides a pathway.

Methods used

Participant Observation involved living in the village for the first four months and then visiting it everyday and staying for few days at a time. This allowed me to reintroduce and re-familiarise myself with the people of Kamtha. It gave me an easy access to many people with whom I could sit and discuss matters as varied as weather, crops, cars or national and state politics. Since September onwards the peak season for agriculture starts it was only in the evenings after work that people were available to speak to me. Thus, staying within the vicinity of the village created opportunities for conversations. Staying in the village also helped me in understanding such aspects of people's lives that were never consciously described by themselves neither was it easy to ask questions on such aspects. For instance, all the children above the age of three in the village were sent to an *anganwadi* (playschool). In Dalit families this was seen as a huge step before their children can start their formal education. The family, with which I stayed, stitched new clothes for their daughter and bought a new bag for her to go to the playschool. Their excitement was telling of the relevance they saw in it. Similarly, whenever a Dalit student topped the exams, a celebratory discussion and comparisons within the four walls of the house would be made with the children of the Marathas. Such processes could only be observed and not asked or discussed. My long continuous stay and then every-day visit with frequent stays helped me to see the unsaid.

During this period of fieldwork, I made detailed observations about Mahar social and political life. This gave me an opportunity to understand the impact of contemporary events on Mahars' lives, and how these events became part of their narratives. These interactions uncovered the prevalent complexity in the relationships that exist between the locals, and revealed complex caste and state relationships.

Speaking to local government officials (*Panchayat* members and *Sarpanch*) helped to shed light on the complex and fluid patterns among social status and state institutions. The study narratives, which are normally simplified by relying on such factors as the insufficient allocation of resources to one caste group and corruption, present far more in-depth and complex relationships

among state institutions. I also observed a large number of small conversations, such as those between Mahar labours and Maratha landowners at the time of sowing and harvesting, meetings before and after *Panchayat elections* which brought together people from different social backgrounds to share their views. Observing these discussions was of great assistance when analysing the data and helped to bring out the complex relationships of Mahars internally within their caste group and externally with other caste groups-especially Maraths and with the state. The simplification of this complexity presented in the binary of ‘empowered’ versus ‘disempowered’ argument present in Dalit literature, fails to provide a fuller understanding of Dalit’s self perception, imagination of success and daily frustrations.

In addition to participant observation, I used the method of unstructured interviewing. I conducted interviews with a variety of people such as with those Mahar families and individuals who worked on Maratha’s land as casual labour, young men from Mahar families who had migrated to towns and cities for work, Mahars from the village who were involved in local electoral politics, Mahar women, Maratha men who participated in local electoral politics, Maratha men who employed Mahar labours on their agriculture land. The unstructured interviews were guided by a series of themes and main questions formulated prior to fieldwork as well those that had begun to emerge with the progress of fieldwork; these inquired about interventions and the processes through which Mahars contest and establish their social identity. However, the follow-up questions were largely shaped by the discussion and the degree of relevance a particular interviewee held with regard to particular topics. Hence, the interviews more closely resembled detailed conversations with particular individuals. The interviews therefore had the advantage of allowing the informants the freedom to talk about the topics that were important to them in more detail. It also allowed me to discuss topics that I was interested in without being constrained by a structured questionnaire. The interviews often moved away from the topic while introducing new interlinking aspects, which I had not thought of initially. Quite a few of these interview conversations became focus group discussions that led different people hailing from the village to join in the conversation with their views, opinions and thoughts – which were simultaneously contradictory and explanatory. The interviews not only

formed the basis of the main narratives analysed for my study, but also provided other insight into different aspects that were normally seen in a disconnected way by the interviewees.

The interviews were recorded mostly in written format in Hindi in my interview notebook. Whenever, a respondent asked me to read his/her answers to them back I promptly shared what I had recorded. Once the interview or conversations were over, I would carefully reconstruct the entire interview with the help of my notes on the same day in order not to lose the sight of the main debates and information. I transcribed and translated some interviews during my data collection in India, but I analysed most of the interviews in England. I did not choose to tape record any of my conversations as I was as uncomfortable with recording people's narratives as the people who were involved in my research. Taking notes helped to bring out uncomfortable issues from interviewees without a fear of being recorded. Additionally, I raised follow-up queries with a few respondents either through email or telephone during the data analysis and writing phase, in order to confirm the emerging themes and exclude the possibility of erroneous interpretations. This also became a means by which I was able to remain updated on potential developments of interest in the research area, even during the post-fieldwork phase.

Caste unlike in academic discussions is a lived reality that is practised and contested in many forms in everyday life. Thus, in the beginning of my field work "caste" as an issue was discussed by Mahars and Marathas alike- both agreed that the practice had ended and it was a thing of past. However, as I began to spend long periods of time in the village, I learnt to converse about specific events or topics and not jump to its relation with caste discrimination immediately. This helped me to interact more in-depth with people of Kamtha and record views on social identity, history of the village, agrarian crisis, issues of landownership etc. without narrowing it down to any specific understanding of caste. This helped me broaden my own understanding on ~~teh~~the workings of the caste present day's rural India.

Even though I was familiar with the area the initial few months were not easy in terms of settling down and sharing my research agenda. In the majority of cases, people would start with quite a few personal questions in order to get to know my family background. Questions regarding what

led me to work in Kamtha were part of most of my introductions. Some of the questions did go as far as verifying my family background and details, as well as my exact residential location and its surrounding area. Overall, this created a feasible and trustworthy environment for me to conduct my interviews, and allowed others to feel at ease in helping me with the information. The process was therefore not initially easy, but over time, as I met more and more people, I started to conduct interviews on a daily basis. Some days I even conducted four interviews, depending on the availability of my interviewees.

Such methods helped me establishing my rapport in the village and also gain access to people, their stories and lives which enabled me to understand everyday relations that form social identity.

Chapter Scheme

After the introduction, I will begin to discuss my main empirical findings and analysis in Chapter two, three and four. Chapter two discusses the centrality of land and its social and legal relevance in Mahar's struggle of creating a new identity. I also highlight how land and its ownership is imagined within Mahar families, what values are attached with it which beyond its economic significance and how lack of land ownership creates complex relationship not between Mahars and Marathas but also within Mahar families. Chapter three, focuses on the employment aspects of Mahars. It traces the journey of Mahar men (and few women) who constantly travel, change jobs and look out for better earning opportunities. It is here that I also show that within the gambit of many jobs, MGNREGA was not seen as an option by Mahars. I also show why certain jobs appeal to Mahar men beyond they payment it provides. In the final chapter four, I conclude the thesis.

Chapter 2

Land as Politics

Introduction

I had reached Kamtha with my luggage on a Tuesday. I had also visited the village on the previous day, to locate Atul *Bhaiya*'s family with whom I had stayed a few years ago⁸. Some children who had dropped out of the school were playing outside his house; they told me that their parents and other adults were not at home as they had all gone to the fields to work. One girl took me to the farm where Atul *bhaiya* and his wife were working. They immediately recognised me. When I told them that I was in the village to do a study for one year and I wanted to stay in the village, they agreed that I could stay with them. Atul *bhaiya* and I exchanged our mobile phone numbers and he said he would come to the bus stop to receive me. When I reached Tuljpaur- the nearest inter-city bus stop for Kamtha- the next day, Atul *bhaiya* was waiting for me outside the stop. I asked him if he had to miss his work that day to come and receive me. He said "*koi tension nahi hai, aaj bazaar ka din hai, chutti hai. Apneich khet par kaam karna hai*" (there is no tension [problem] as it is a market day, it is my off day. I will have to work only on my land). That is how I learnt that Mahars⁹ in Kamtha owned land and also worked on other's land as daily wage labourers. The part of the village where Atul *bhaiya*'s house was located was on the southern end of the village as its separate part called *Ambachishet*. Although it is said as one word it is however a sentence- *Amba chi shet* meaning Amba's farm. It was named after someone called Ambadas who owned most of the land in this village. On his land many years ago Mahars worked as tenants. Fourteen Mahar families are settled on this land today. All these families owned and cultivated land. I stayed in Atul *bhaiya*'s house for next three months and became a regular visitor to his house afterwards. It proved to be a good place to meet other Mahar families who would come to enquire about me or those families who remembered me came to invite me for meals in their house. To further familiarize myself with the village I began to do a small household survey. One of the questions for those families that owned land was the number of years for which they had owned it. All the fourteen families in *Ambachishet* had replied that they owned land for many years. They further referred to the origin of their land

⁸ My first visit to Kamtha was in 2008 as part of my MA degree. At that time I had stayed at Atul *bhaiya*'s house for few days.

⁹ Scheduled caste in Kamtha.

ownership as “*diya tha*” (was given) and current ownership as “*humari hai*” (it is ours). They narrated their land ownership as a process in which after the land was *given* to them their position changed from being tenants to the owners of the land.

Mahars were also settled in two other parts of Kamtha. There were seventeen Mahar families at the beginning of the village and another eleven families who lived on the eastern side of the village called the ‘mali’ area. Most of these families were landless. However, they had mobilized themselves to secure public lands, especially the forest land for cultivation around Kamtha. This land “ownership” unlike the ownership of land amongst Mahars of *Ambachishet* was ‘illegal’ and had provoked violent retaliation from the dominant community in the village called Marathas. Both the categories of Mahars were however cultivating land which they considered as a matter of their rights. If in one case they challenged the dominant caste through the state mechanism (Mahars from *Ambachishet*), in the other they challenged both the state and the dominant caste to cultivate land (other landless Mahars in Kamtha). The struggle to own and cultivate land by Mahars in Kamtha was a process through which caste relations were politicised at the grassroots level.

In this chapter I place Mahars of Kamtha within the historic context of their relationship with other dominant caste and state at large and look at the ways in which their landownership has begun to re-define these relationships. For one, the struggle of Mahars at large and particularly in this village is based on their stigmatized past and experiences of discrimination by the ritually higher caste. Second, that they challenge the domination of the ‘higher’ caste through emphasis on implementation of rights granted to them in the constitution. By this they also invoke the “neutral” state that will protect and grant their rights. To elaborate on these points I have divided the land ownership amongst Mahars into two parts. The first part looks at the process of land ownership of Mahars from *Ambachishet* and the second part discusses the mobilisation and cultivation of the forest land by Mahars. This categorization captures the major way in which Mahars in Kamtha think of their land and relate to each other as well as to the dominant caste in the village. The next section will historically trace the relationship between the caste status and the state, identifying the junctures where these relationships were ruptured and new kinds of

Kamtha

The village Kamtha is in Osmanabad district of Maharashtra. The nearest town from Kamtha is Tuljapur, where the office of the *Panchayat Samiti* is located. Tuljapur also serves as the biggest local market and an important centre for people to find work based on daily wage labour.

Kamtha is a small village, marked by unequal land divide, where largest and medium land owners are from the dominant caste called Marathas (55 houses). While the small land owners and landless population is mostly from the Mahar community (49 houses). In between these two extremes is the Mali community (15 houses) one of the backward castes, constitutionally specified as 'Other Backward Castes' (OBC) and Muslims (9 houses). Both these groups owned land and cultivated it. But at the same time they have at-least one person from each household employed in an off-farm work. Those members who worked outside the farm were all male who usually found employment as taxi drivers in the nearby cities and towns. From Mali community as many as three men worked as permanent employees in the local level Panchayats. The other scheduled caste households in the village were Maang (4 houses) and Kumbhar (1 house). Identifying the Mahar area in Kamtha was easy. The margins of the village were marked by Mahar houses. They were located at the beginning, end and on the eastern side of the village. The first settlements of Mahar houses were inside narrow lanes at the beginning of the village. These lanes were so narrow and hidden that it was difficult to guess from a distance that as many houses could be built inside it. There were old and new concrete houses. It was a separate area outside the 'core' village. The core of the village was located along side the Mahar settlements at the beginning of the village. But only Maratha houses were located within it.

Some Maratha houses were semi concrete and semi mud though most of them were fully concrete. They were tightly packed lanes of houses that shared backyards. One of the biggest houses in the core was a double story building that stretched from one corner to the other. It was not difficult to guess that this house was of the richest farmer of the village on whose land almost the entire village had worked at some point of time. This small part of the village, where it wouldn't take more than ten minutes to walk around gave a feeling of a town unlike its beginning and the end where the Mahars lived. There were three shops in this core that sold all the items of daily need and more. Mobile recharge cards, cold drinks, different varieties of rice, chocolates etc. were available here and as the shop owner told me once "*as people need it I have*

to keep these things” which indicated changes in not just what people needed in terms of material things but also the easy availability of these items. In the morning outside most of the Maratha houses I could see small *rangoli*¹⁰, something that I started to distinctly connect with the ‘upper’ castes. With the ongoing *Indira Awas Yojana* (the housing scheme) most of the Dalit houses were concrete similar to Maratha houses. However, these houses remained unpainted with roughly plastered walls that showed cement and bricks. On the contrary Maratha houses were painted with bright colours with traditional soldiers painted outside the doors with the word *swagatam* (welcome). I had guessed the painting of the external walls of different Maratha houses showed the difference between the large farmers and the small farmers. This proved right when I started to interact with Marathas through household survey and later in several conversations. From proper concrete houses it was the grooming of their houses that had become an indicator economic status.

Further inside the village there was a temple and a mosque. Both were the biggest buildings in the village. However, both the buildings were built in different years and the efforts of building and preserving the temple did not in any way share the fights and politics that went into building the new mosque in place of the old one. The Muslim houses formed the periphery of the core in front of the *Panchayat* office which was located at the end of the core. And then began the *Kucha rasta* (unmetalled road) leading to the Mahar *basti* (settlement) called *Ambachishet*. The *Kucha rasta* was a long stretch of about 20 min walk from the core of the village to the point where *Ambachishet* begins. One had to pass through the farming lands of most of the big Maratha farmers to reach there. There are three water wells on this way that were not used any more for drinking purpose, although people drew water from it for other purposes like irrigation or for their cattle. Mahars attached some significance to these wells as they were not allowed to draw water from the village well till as late as 1992 when the first retaliation came from them against it. This retaliation resulted in the arrest of few Maratha men, ended the practice of untouchability atleast in overt forms in public spaces.

Ambachishet was an area in transition. Its thatched roof huts were hurriedly been replaced by concrete houses. I saw see red brick everywhere in *Ambachishet*. The most common sight at the

¹⁰ Rangoli is a decorative design mostly made outside the houses to welcome Gods.

beginning of my fieldwork was the concrete base built through a personal investment by Below Poverty Line (BPL) households to qualify for the money sanction from the Government to reimburse the investment made in constructing it. After which they could apply for further cash to continue the construction¹¹. In *Ambachishet* People tied their cattle in-front of their houses unlike big farmers who left them on the farm under the supervision of a family member or of someone they employed. Also, the location of houses in this area looked like the way wild mushrooms grow. Some were very close to each other while others were far distant. Through the stories that people narrated of how the settlement in *Ambachishet* started which previously was a farm land, showed the reason behind the unplanned haphazard manner in which houses were constructed in this area. Beyond *Ambachishet* there were few Dalits' cow-sheds and farm land of people from different communities including Muslims. The well located in here was used for irrigation and other purpose and was a major source of water.

For drinking water the new government water pipeline was the main source. Water supply ran for two hours in the morning and evening. In case of extra water requirement people used bore well that was dug recently with the help of the government for the irrigation Mahars' land. This bore well was managed collectively by the Dalit families who took responsibility for its maintenance. Although bore wells were introduced in the 1980s onwards when electricity came in this village (though it was limited to farm area only). It was only recently that Mahars had begun to use it for their farm-lands as well. This irrigation facility was limited to cultivated area near *Ambachishet* and not to the land that Dalits and Muslims owned on the hills surrounding Kamtha.

Out of forty-nine houses of the Mahar caste, twenty one had ownership of land through the land tenancy Act. Most of these families were settled in *Ambachishet* with few families living in the Mahar settlement on the village side. Twenty eight houses of these families did not own land through the tenancy Act. They were mostly landless except few families that still owned the *watan* land, which was resold to the Mahars after abolition of the *watan* land by the government

¹¹ Under the housing scheme the foundation of the house has to be built before applying for the sanction of the money under the scheme. This foundation "proves" that money sanctioned will only be used for constructing the house and not for any other purpose. Generally the first installment is the reimbursement of the money invested and then further installments are released to finish the construction.

of India. Most of these families however had begun to regularly cultivate the ‘forest land’ in Kamtha since 2002-03.

This chapter brings out the story of land ownership amongst these Mahar houses. It discusses Mahar’s claims of landownership as a process through which caste relations were politicised in Kamtha.

The narrative of land as a ‘gift’ and ‘right’

Land as given

Baba *bhaiya* who lived in *Ambachishet*, owned two acres of land. He said that it was *given* to his family by a landlord. He was one of the first people I had interviewed about the landownership. When I asked him how did he come to own the land, he said the following:

“It’s an old story from my grandfather’s time. We used to work on someone else’s farm. It was called batai par kaam karna (working as share croppers). We would cultivate the land and divide the produce into half between us and the malik (master/ landlord). This system carried on for a long time. When the owner of the farm was dying, he said he wanted to give his land to us. It was, his land, his will on what he wanted to do with it¹². He had no one in his family (aage-peeche koi nahi tha). And no relative came to ask for him. After he passed away we divided the land amongst us and continued to cultivate it. After sometime our name passed in 7/12¹³. But I don’t know when it passed”.

Other landed Mahar families that I spoke with shared the story of their ownership of land in a similar way. They emphasised on this ‘act of giving’ that I see they put forth as a ground on which their land should not be challenged by others and particularly by the people of the dominant caste. They would elaborate on how they¹⁴ took care of the erstwhile landowner and how their relationship was one of a father and children. It then becomes easier for them to

¹² I had asked him a question: why would he give all his land to you?

¹³ Dalits have acquired this land through the Land Tenancy Act, which transfers land to the tillers. This information in local terminology is called ‘the name has passed in the 7/12 (*Saat/baraah mein naam nikala hai*). The 7/12 Extract is an extract from the Land register maintained by the revenue department of the Government of Maharashtra. The extract gives information about: the name of the owner of the land and its cultivator, the area of the land, the type of cultivation- whether irrigated or rain-fed, the crops planted in the last cultivating season. It also records loans extended to the land owner given by Govt. agencies including the purpose of the loan. In rural areas the ownership of a land can be established on the basis of the 7/12 extract.

¹⁴ By which they meant their parents and/or grand parents

explain the transfer of land from the owner/father to his tenants/children. Although they never used the word ‘gift’ to refer to this *giving* of land, their description of the process evokes the meaning of a gift. Oxford dictionary defines a gift as “a thing *given willingly* to someone *without payment*; a present” (emphasis added). In all the conversations that I had with landed Mahars their story of land ownership started with the landowner willingly giving them the land because he had no one in his family and they took care of him.

However, when I asked them to tell me more about the landlord they would say they didn’t know as it happened many generations ago. In a number of interviews which were mostly in the form of informal conversations people were interested in talking more about their current problems in cultivation than discussing a thing of past. For me it was becoming difficult to gather any detailed information about the landlord beyond the common knowledge that Mahars’ owned the land that previously belonged to him. Then in the course of few interviews people started referring me to someone called Jalindher *kaka*. They shared that Jalindher *kaka* could give me the “right” information about the past and the present.

Jalindher *kaka* at the age of 75-80 years was one of the oldest members amongst Mahars. He is also the person who initiated the collection of legal documents of Mahars’ land in Kamtha. When I met him, he narrated to me that his father and forefathers cultivated the land for the family of someone called Sidhram Vani. He was a Brahmin landlord who owned around 52 acres of land in and around Kamtha. He had two sons (Ambadas and Babu) and a daughter. Babu was not married and did not take interest in agriculture. But Ambadas was interested in agriculture and would stay on farm for long periods. According to him, Ambadas was a liberal man as he did not discriminate on the basis of caste. He did not practice untouchability and did not charge rent from Mahars. Giving some insight into Ambadas’ personal life Jalindher *kaka* shared that his wife did not appreciate that Ambadas sat and ate with the Mahars. He recounted the following:

“His wife was from a wealthy Brahmin family. She believed and differentiated between people as upper and lower (chote-bade log). But Ambadas was a kind man. He never believed in people being upper and lower. He treated us like his own children. This, his wife never liked. She used to scold ‘us’ when Ambadas was not around. And also did not give ‘us’ enough grains/ food. She would not stay with him all the time. But whenever she came to live in the village she was strict with ‘us’. After few years she left Ambadas and

never came back. After that Ambadas never married again. He had no children. 'We' used to take care of him. He said that he had no one in his family and that we were his family. He said that we can divide this land equally amongst ourselves when he passes away. Sometimes he offered to transfer the land to us in writing. But we trusted him and never asked him for it. We called him baba (Father). We respected him like our father. He was a saint. When he died no one from his family came for his last rites. We arranged for his cremation and performed all the ceremonies. After which we continued to work on the field".

It was difficult to trace if this story was indeed true and if Ambadas had “willingly” transferred his land (even if vocally) to the Mahars. Approximately five kilometers before Kamtha there was a social science institute called TISS¹⁵ that had worked on several Maharashtra governments’ rural development projects in the Osmanabad district. I met Dr Ramesh Jhare, who taught at this institute and had studied this area for more than two decades. I met him to discuss the land stories that I learnt from different people in Kamtha. He drew my attention to the social reform movements in which ‘upper’ and dominant caste had participated. Even if it was difficult to ascertain that Ambadas willingly ‘gave’ his land to the tenants who worked on it, it was worth remembering that this area was significant for the social movement *bhudaan*- donation of Land- in India. Kamtha was situated in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra that was part of the erstwhile Hyderabad state. In post independence years the *bhudaan* movement had started from this state. Dr. Jhare commented that there could be a possibility that Ambadas followed Gandhism and donated land as part of the *Bhudaan* movement.

While Jalindher *kaka* described in detail about why Ambadas gave his land to the Mahar tenants, he also recounted another story where historically Mahars had donated land to the Marathas. In one of the meetings at his house while discussing the land issue amongst Mahars. He said:

“Many years ago Mahars had a lot of land. Our land in the village was the most fertile and productive. And others were jealous of us. Many people from outside proposed to buy this land but we always refused. Then one day a priest (pandit) came in the village and asked our forefathers to donate this land to him as an offering (bheeksha). Our forefathers

¹⁵ Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS)

couldn't say no to the priest because it was a sin. Later this priest gave our land to the Brahmins. That's how Mahars were cheated and they were made landless".

When I asked him how he knew this story he said it is a well known fact, Mahars had so much land that this area was called Mahar-rashtra indicating to the state's name Maharashtra. The stories around land and Ambadas that Baba *bhaiya*, Jalindher *kaka* and others shared with me ran strongly and in homogeneity within Mahar community. In Ambachishet the 14 Mahar houses belonged to the families of four brothers who initially "were given" the land. All these families that inherited land from the four brothers were engaged in cultivation as their primary occupation. Most of these families had atleast one member who had migrated in the 1990s to find work outside the village and had returned to Kamtha by early 2000. Thus, a common pattern of occupational choices along with a strong sense of a common past and caste identity existed within these families to the extent that *as a Mahar* one family could speak about the other. Or like in the case of Jalindher *kaka* who others believed could speak "correctly" about all the Mahars in Kamtha and their collective past. Therefore, when I took Jalindher *kaka's* story about Mahars donating their land to a Priest to Ramesh Rokade he said:

"Ofcourse it is true. I will tell you an old practice. Earlier when Mahars went into the upper caste area they had to tie a broom to their waist to clean their polluted steps. They were to also tie a tumbler to their neck so that their sweat and cough does not fall on the ground. Why do you think they were able to do this? These people are the most cunning. Even Ambedkar had to go through this. That is why Mahars stand against them everywhere. ¹⁶They are fighting for their haq (right)".

Like Ramesh Rokade most of the Mahars create a dialogue between their experiential past and the mythical past. On this basis then a collective assertion of Mahars comes forth. Such a dialogue was most clearly evident in the stories about the dispossession and possession of land by them where Mahars claim that they are demanding (economic) resources and (social) position which were always theirs if it were not for the cunning intentions of the dominant caste to cheat them. The 'past' for Mahars was an integral element of identity assertion and was a way to deal with their present oppression. For them past is not a 'rational history' but is a story of their desired future (Narayan: 88). The re-inventing of past

¹⁶ I asked him a question: why are Mahars against them (Marathas/dominant caste)?

by marginalized communities challenges the standard production of knowledge. It rather actively and consciously pushes the boundaries of history as knowledge (Chakrabarty, 2003). The subaltern groups link the narratives of their past with their contemporary socio-political context. These narratives of Mahar past were popularized through Booklets and print composed by the leaders of Dalit groups in the cities and was circulated in villages through local leaders and Dalit activists. Kamtha had only one library, which was built by the Mahars. Most of the literate Mahars accessed this library to read about the history of Maharashtra, life story of their leader Dr. Ambedkar and the historical understanding of caste as such. Such processes helped Mahars in asserting themselves against the dominant caste and put forward their demand for an appropriate share of power in the village setting.



Ambedkar library in Kamtha

But it was difficult to *see* this dialogue happening among Mahars in their daily lives. On an average day the daily *evening talks* between them were mostly about water and electricity supply on their farms or exchange of film CDs. This however changed after three months, around the time of *Panchayat* elections in the village. And I witnessed for the first time Mahar men publically talking about themselves as a community and vocalizing the memories of their oppressive past (recent past as well as distant past)¹⁷. A new blue flag with a white wheel (chakra) in the centre symbolizing the *Dalit flag* was bought and tied on the tallest tree in Ambachishet. And until the elections were over these evening meetings among Mahar men continued. The second time such Mahar gathering happened was on the occasion of Ambedkar *Jayanti* on 14th April. These two occasions in a way came out as an example of how stories about Mahars' past assume relevance and play an active role in forming Dalit community which then asserts itself for acquiring socio-cultural empowerment.

Land as a Right

The legal entitlement of land has immediately divided the Mahars in Kamtha into two groups, where both groups believe that land that they 'own' is their right. Those families that inherited land from the landlord Ambadas almost two generations ago are the legal owners of the land as it was passed to them under Hyderabad Tenancy and Agriculture Lands Act, 1950 (henceforth, Land Tenancy Act). However, the other group did not inherit the land from those four brothers who were initially entitled to the land. There are two reasons for this: one, due to several divisions of the land in the increasing population of the Mahars not every individual family could inherit land. Second, some of the Mahar families have settled in Kamtha through relations of marriage in which case they are seen as outsiders or *mehman*¹⁸, not making them eligible to inherit the land. This group has *grabbed* the government land commonly known as forest land in the village. They do not have legal entitlement on this land unlike the previous group. This section will therefore discuss the different and similar ways in which these two groups of Mahars

¹⁷ This discussion mostly meant- talking about individual Maratha men whom they thought as their political opponent. They would then begin to talk about that Maratha individual's father or family and how they have always been cunning and deceitful.

¹⁸ It means guest. But in this part it is a respectful term for relatives, especially for the son-in laws.

see their landownership and attach their idea of right (*haq*) to it. I will also discuss ways in which larger Dalit movements have enabled Mahars to assert and protect their land from dominant caste and also encouraged the landless Mahars to own land in order to better their socio-economic status.

Most of the Mahars in *Ambachishet* that I interviewed before meeting Jalindher *Kaka* would at some point recommend me to talk to him. The main reason for mentioning his name was, their ownership on land had been challenged in the court and Jalindher *kaka* was the main person fighting this court case on behalf of other Mahar landowners. The court case against the land ownership of Dalits was not mentioned to me in the beginning when I had started to talk to people about their land, income and economic situation. One morning while I was having breakfast with Pallavi *tai* (Atul *Bhaiya's* wife) outside her house, Baba *bhaiya* came to tell me that he was going to Tuljapur that day and wouldn't be able to take me to *dongari* (forest land) as he had promised me the previous day to show where it was. I asked him if he was going to Tuljapur to buy groceries to which he said:

"No I am going because the date of our court case is out. We have to meet few officers in the talathi's office (local land revenue officer). This is the second time that I am going to Tuljapur in a month just for this case. On one hand it is important to keep a track on the case and see where it is going. On the other, it takes away so much time from work. I will show you dongri tomorrow if that's okay?"

I agreed to go with him the next day but I was very confused about the court case that he had mentioned. I asked Atul *Bhaiya* about this case and he said in low voice "*vo chal raha hai na*" (that thing is going on). Before he shared the details of the court case he mentioned that land judgment will be in their favour and they will continue to own land. After that he said that "Deshmukhs" are claiming 52 acres of land that belongs to Mahars. They (Mahars) won the case "before" and now they will win it again. The person and/or family name that Atul *bhaiya* referred to as "Deshmukh" is a common Brahmin surname in Maharashtra. However, interestingly, the man who had started the court case against them did not have this surname and yet most Mahars while talking about this man referred to him as a Deshmukh. All my field-notes of this period noted the name of the previous landlord and his subsequent relatives as "Deshmukhs". It was later when I began to talk to Jalindher *kaka*- who would also occasionally

call them as Deshmukhs- I noticed in the legal papers that the actual surnames of Ambadas and his nephew (who started the court case) were *Vani* and *Betale* respectively and that by referring to them as “Deshmukhs” Mahars were actually talking about their caste identity and status as Brahmins. The Brahmin-Mahar dichotomy or the oppressive lower caste status of which Mahars have vivid memory appeared this way on many occasions in the land issue but mostly in its subtle forms.

Few days later I was invited for dinner by Hanumant *kaka* who lived few houses away from Atul *bhaiys*'s house. He and his older son besides working on their land also worked as wage labourers on others' land. He owned 5 acres and cultivated grapes and onion on it. He was very proud of his younger son who was studying for a bachelor's degree in Tuljapur. He declared to me *“till I am capable I will do anything to support his education”*. I took this opportunity to talk to him about the court case. Cautiously I asked about his views on it. He seemed least surprised that I knew and with much ease said:

“We have already won the case. It's just dragging because that man wants to try his luck. All these years they didn't bother and then suddenly they think they should try to get some more land. They have nothing to lose and they think that by scaring/threatening us they might be lucky to get more land. If you want to give someone place to sit they try to spread their body to sleep. And if you let them sleep they might want to make a house there. Have you ever heard 'erandatse gurrhala'- it means you can never have sugar out of a bitter plant”.

Although Mahars would mention about the changing caste dynamics in their village and the changing attitude of the dominant caste (Marathas) towards them, Hanumant *Kaka*'s phrase of a *bitter plant* significantly highlighted the active memory of an oppressive past. Here he indicated towards many of the defining social and economic elements of a caste hierarchy that have been adverse for him and his community. In a way this informed his stand on this case, he looked at this court case from two stand points. The fact that a Brahmin man was contesting their ownership on land was seen by him as the “nature” of Brahmins to exploit and marginalize Mahars. But what made difference in this unequal relationship was state's interference through which he expected to get the judgment in his community's favour. While speaking he quickly brought out some files to show me the legal papers that declared his ownership. He said *“For me there is nothing to worry, we will win the case because it has already been transferred in our*

names". For most Mahars this was the source of their confidence as legal entitlement to land ensured that they could reject and even fight back when dominant caste threatened them. This confidence in the state machinery that it will not necessarily side with the dominant caste was also expressed by other Mahars who owned land.

Papu Sonevane also owned land under Land tenancy. Other Mahars would tease him as "connected" because he managed to get an installment of Rs.10, 000 from the government's housing scheme "very quickly" as well as Rs. 25,000 to buy cattle or goats from another Government's scheme. Two of his children were in higher secondary school while one had joined an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) for vocational training in a nearby city called Gaurgaon. His new house under *Indira Awas Yojana* (Indira Housing Scheme) was under construction, outside this house I met him several times to discuss continuities and changes in various aspects of his life from the past. He told me that things have changed a lot. *"Life has become much easier. Nowadays no one wants to walk, not even to the village¹⁹. They want their gadi (motorcycle)"*. He had four acres of land on which he cultivated tomatoes and grapes. For him cultivating the land had brought stability in his income. He, like most other landed Mahars, said that he is not worried about the land case because it was already in their name. It was not much of a threat. He said: *"if it is happening let it happen, what we can do? We are still cultivating our land; we are investing in it with new manure and (crop) medicine. It does not bother me. But yes if it doesn't rain then I'll be tensed"*. He mentioned that their struggle and government's (*sarkar*) support to "poor people" has helped in reducing their dependency on others. Drawing my attention to their changing situation he said:

"...25 years ago sarkar wouldn't give us anything. We didn't have electricity or irrigation facility. We had to buy everything by ourselves. Even in 2000 all the Mahars from Ambachishet had to contribute money to build a water pipeline and buy a motor pump for irrigation. However, now things are changing. We have good electricity supply on our farms so it is easier to irrigate the crops. In 2010 a new government water pipeline was built. In the same year a drinking tap also 'came' from the government scheme. So now we don't worry about using the well for other purpose, we only use it for irrigation. Every

¹⁹ The main 'core' of the village Kamtha where the dominant caste lives is called 'the village'. Even though Ambachishet is part of Kamtha, mostly only the dominant caste area is referred as village. The rest of the parts are called by its independent names like Ambachishet or basti. The other part of Kamtha outside the 'core' was known as 'Mal' after the caste name Mali- who had the maximum number of houses in this part. Thus Kamtha had three parts: 'the village', Ambachishet (also known as Basti) and Mal.

Mahar house in this area has a pukka (concrete) house. It was difficult for us to afford it some years ago. But now our income has improved so the condition of the house has also improved. Government also helped in it. Like me many people have indira yojana (government's housing scheme) to build their house. In Ambachishet the first house under this Yojana was built in 2003. I have bought two oxen from another government scheme. Like this Government through many other schemes supports people below 'Daridra Resha' (poverty line). Since one of 'our people' was a Sarpanch (village head) we learnt everything. We understood what we should do if we need something (kya karne ke liye, kya karna hoga). Caste violence has also reduced. There are no more fights with them (Marathas) anymore. They know that we have power now, they can't stop our food. Also our children study together. Through education they learn that violence and caste discrimination is wrong. So these things have stopped".

Like Papu Sonavane other Mahars who cultivated their own land complained or compared about the government schemes and facilities to them. As far as the court case was concerned they assured me that it was not a threat to their land ownership. Their experience of this court case that started almost fifteen years ago at the time of my fieldwork, had created a situation where instead of attaching much seriousness or emergency to it some people even called the person who started the court case as *pagal* (mad). These conversations although revealed what people thought about their land status, other dominant castes and this court case. It was only when I met Jalindher *kaka* that I could trace the history of this court case and had access to the land documents.

Under the Hyderabad Tenancy and Agriculture Lands Act, (1950), Ambadas' land had passed in the name of four Mahar brothers namely Gopal, Itoba, Pandurang and Dondiba in 1951 as they were recognised as tenants on this land. Jalindher *kaka* mentioned that Mahars in Kamtha knew about this transfer of land since many years but he couldn't recall who exactly first visited the lands record office for this information. Later he said that in 1987 he personally went to enquire in the office of the *Talathi* (village accountant) to know if the land had been passed in their name. He said there was "news" around that time, that people who cultivate the land also legally owned it. This created a lot of excitement in people and he submitted the request form (popularly known as *kul ka form*) to know who owns the land and if in his father's name the land had been transferred legally. He showed me the reply that upon his inquiry he had received from *Talathi's*

office. The reply mentioned that on 24th September 1951 the land was transferred in the name of Jalindher *kaka*'s father and his brothers.

In 1996 he filed a complaint at the Deputy Collector's office (Land Reforms) claiming his ownership over this land. However, this claim was rejected by the Deputy Collector's office and the entire 52 acres (16+36 acres) was declared in the name of the Mahar families. As narrated to me by Jalindher *kaka*, in 2000, Ambadas' nephew then appealed to the appellate authority of Maharashtra revenue tribunal at Aurangabad. According to him, the nephew even bribed the village revenue officer (*Talathi*) to show that he had been the primary cultivator and the land was never transferred to anyone else. Jalindher dada and other Mahars from Kamtha protested against this complaint. They claimed that the records were forged and they showed their copy of the land records which was obtained from the *Talathi*'s office in 1987. Following this, the appeal by Ambadas' nephew was rejected. It was declared that under Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act., (1950), this land should be in the name of Jalindher *Kaka*'s father and his brothers. Their complaint against the *Talathi* was also registered and he was suspended from his office on the charges of cheating and bribery. The case is now in the Aurangabad court. Mahars continue to defend and fight for their land ownership.

Snatching the right: Mahars' claim over government land

Mahars' land ownership within Kamtha was internally split into two groups, one group that owned land under the land tenancy act and the other group that had encroached upon the Government land which is most commonly referred to as "forest land" in the village. Although, the larger Dalit land question is not a new phenomenon in Marathwada region, which started with Ambedkar and gained momentum since the 1950s (Waghmore, 2012), encroachment on government land by Mahars in Kamtha was much recent and had started only after 1991. All over Maharashtra Dalits' claim over *gairan* (pasture land), forest and other kinds of land on which they had begun to illegally cultivate was first institutionally recognised in 1978 and then again in 1991 through Government Resolutions (GR) passed by the state government of Maharashtra. Since the GR of 1991, further encroachment on such lands increased by Dalits with

the hope that these encroachments will also be regularized. However, it has also led to various violent and other retaliatory actions by the dominant caste in this village who are mostly Marathas. Following the GR of 1991 Maratha dominated Panchayats have often allocated fallow and grazing land for social forestry as a retaliatory measure as it brings land under the purview of central government making it more difficult for the Dalits to mobilize institutional recognition (ibid). At the same time villages including Kamtha in Marathwada witnessed violent attacks on Dalits' life and property by the dominant caste following the regularization of land in 1991. Forest land as such is an uneven rocky land which is not suitable for proper farming. In the absence of any irrigation facility it allowed only limited farming. Most of the people who cultivated this land did not do it regularly and only sowed *jowari*²⁰ once a year with little expectation of a good crop. Vasant Kalu Rokade (henceforth Vasant Rokade) who owned 2 acres of forest land contests the idea that this land always belonged to the government. He claimed what we know as forest land today used to be a fallow land that did not belong to anyone. But when in several parts of Osmanabad and beyond in Maharashtra, Mahars began to claim this fallow land as theirs, Maratha who formed the majority in Panchayat in Kamtha, in a bid to stop Mahars from making similar claims on their village's fallow land, donated it to the forest department. For him in this way Marathas ensured Mahars continue to remain landless.

“is zameen ko poochte nahi the (they wouldn't care about this land). In the decades of 80s and 90s there was news everywhere that Mahars and other Dalits were taking land. Marathas couldn't bear this. But what could Mahar people do, they were poor and without help. Marathas held the most fertile land. The only land that was available to us was gairan (fallow/grazing land). But at that time our people were not powerful in the Panchayat. Only Maratha people ruled there. At that time forest work had started in our village and they donated all the fallow land to the forest department.”

When in early 1990s social forestry was started in this area as an initiative under Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS)²¹, mostly Dalits from Kamtha participated in taking this employment opportunity. Vasant Rokade did not see any benefit of such employment as he said *“jhar lagane se paet nahi bharta (you can't fill your stomach by planting trees)”*. He had joined the Dalit Panthers in 1988 and wished for more radical change in the condition of Mahars. He proudly

²⁰ Sorghum

²¹ Employment Guarantee Scheme

shared that he along with his other *sathis* (colleagues in the movement) would rush to villages as soon as they would learn about any atrocity against Mahars. In 1999 he was even arrested while participating in a demonstration against caste atrocities. He had attempted to cultivate forest land in 1992-93 but faced much violence. *“Maratha people threw daggar (stones) at me and I was badly beaten up. My life was threatened. It was difficult to go anywhere outside my house. For few days police had to accompany me everywhere”*. Part of the reason for this violence was because Vikas Kalu Rokade had stood for *Panchayat* elections and had become the deputy *Sarpanch* of the village. The politicisation of caste relations in Kamtha was to a great extent related to the Dalit land question. Cities were sometimes the centre where Dalit men searching for work came across organised Dalit movements. Upon their return to Kamtha they would then discuss these experiences with families and friends. Sandeepan Namdev Rokade worked on construction sites in Osmanabad and then Pune. He stayed outside Kamtha for 7 years. Later, he returned to the village and started working as a contractor on construction sites in Tuljapur. *“I joined the sangathan (organization) in Pune. I made some friends there who would go for demonstrations. I also went few times with them. I liked it. I learnt a lot from them about what are our Mahar people’s rights”*. I couldn’t know if Sandeepan had “formally” joined any Dalit organisation. Unlike Vasant Rokade he never said that he joined “the” movement. Also he did not travel outside of Pune when his friends went for protests in other places. However, his experiences in Pune did have an impact when he returned to Kamtha. Along with Vasant Rokade and few other relatives he had also attempted to cultivate forest land and had faced violent backlash from the Marathas. I first learnt about him while talking to a group of men about caste relations in Kamtha. They said Sandeepan, Vasant Rokade and another relative had bought a Television set exclusively for Mahars in this village. Sandeepan told me that he along with his friends had boycotted the village TV as it was bought by the Maratha dominated *Panchayat*.

“They (Marathas) watched programme about God on the TV but did not learn to respect human beings. I don’t believe in God, but it was difficult to explain it to other people. Mahar people would line up outside the Panchayat office to watch the show every Sunday morning. Those days there was only black and white TV so people who stood in the sun couldn’t see anything. Maratha people with their kids would occupy the sitting place. And all Mahar people stood outside in the sun. Do you think they could see anything? Some children would climb the tree and sit on the top to watch TV. It was useless to tell our

people to not watch the TV. So I and my friends decided to buy a new TV for our samaj (community)”.

The new TV was kept in Budh Temple of the village where Mahars as Vasant Rokade said when I asked him about the incident “*watched TV with dignity*”. Bharat Gundiba Rokade similarly went to Osmanabad to work but continued to live in Kamtha as it only took him an hour to reach there. He started working as a mechanic in a car garage and then also worked on construction sites. After few years he started working as a mason in Tuljapur. He explained that having read books on the life of Dr Ambedkar he understood that land for Mahars is as essential as water and food. He along with Vasant Rokade joined Dalit panthers and went along with other organization workers to participate in protests and demonstration in various parts of Maharashtra. “*I used to go to many villages. I didn’t care if I had to lose a day’s wage. I went to these places to fight for our rights. Everywhere you go you will find poverty amongst Mahars-may be little bit less nowadays but they are exploited by shasan (literally ruler, here referred to state) and Marathas alike*”. On his first attempt to cultivate the forest land like others, he blamed the state-Maratha nexus for the violence and stopping them from cultivating the land. For him it was a fight between dominant caste “ego” and Mahars’ dignity. Elaborating on this he described the forest area as a difficult terrain which is not leveled. For irrigation on that land rains is the only source, but these things have not stopped Mahars from cultivating that land. He explained that landless Mahars have to do something for their survival. If they earn in the cities and sow some crops, they bring home a mixed income of crop and wages, “*then I don’t have to stand at their door to ask for anything*”. For him it was precisely this that had hurt Marathas’ ego. “*Now things have settled but before there used to be lot of fights. They couldn’t see Mahars riding a motorcycle or building house. Why would they like that? We worked on their farms and only ate the left-overs, now we refuse their food even if they come to give us on our door. Instead we ask them to join us for a meal!*” There were other landless Mahars in Kamtha who had encroached the forest land but were not part of any Dalit movement or organization. Their motivation for encroachment arose from the fact that others had land in the village. For them land was significant as an asset in itself even if it was not very viable for agriculture. Suresh Bhimrao Rokade was one of those Mahars who were beaten up by Marathas when they had first attempted to claim the land. He said land is important because once they begin to cultivate, land quality will slowly improve. He

believed that their encroachment will be regularized or declared legal. And the legal status will enable them in arranging for further help that state provides to the farmers. He said:

“After every ten years that thing comes out- that thing you call GR- to give land in the name of all those who have been cultivating that land. We already know the location of everyone’s land so we cultivate only on our patch...you can’t compare the forest land with the other fertile one (neeche ki zameen). This land is full of stones and rocks. It takes me months to clear and level (pattai karna) the patch of land if I plan to sow something. Then you have to arrange for water to irrigate. Every crop needs so much water, all throughout the rainy season I stare upwards to see if it will rain. If we arrange for a tubewell in this area it will cost a lot and others might not allow us to do this. But once the GR comes out we can then ask for help like other normal/common farmers.”

Suresh Rokade’s efforts for encroaching forest land was although encouraged by his other relatives who actively and openly fought for Mahar rights, his own reasons for owning land was not just a symbolic claim of right but an economic necessity that landless Mahars needed.

“Previously our people worked on the nursery. So many women from Mahar community went to plant trees. Now you see there are trees everywhere, our area is so green. But government sends more trees to plant. We ask where is the space to plant more trees? But they keep sending it. So now no one works on it and all the new plants are dying. Like this when all the building work is finished in Tuljapur, where will those people work, who now go to Tuljapur for work? Some will go to Pune, others will go to Sholapur or Osmanabad- we will be like a Bhatki samaj (nomadic tribe). But if you have land, every year it will give you something, even if it is less. Land will sustain atleast two-three generations after us and then they can arrange something for themselves”.

Kashinath Machindra Rokade works as a daily wage labour on farm land in and around Kamtha. He said he could find plenty of work in Kamtha and thus never chose to go to the cities. He decided to cultivate the forest land because it was an opportunity for him to own land. Although he complained that nothing grew on *that* land and he did not think that land could provide subsistence for his family he was still in favour of claiming it. Like others he also believed that this land will pass in their name at some point of time. Recalling the first time, when he along with other relatives had attempted to claim the forest land, he said that Marathas were *bad* (*badmash the*) at that time. Mahars were barred from buying anything from Maratha shops in the village; a lot of Marathas also stopped employing Mahars on their farm for the labour work. Kashinath did not work for two months during this time. His relatives in Kamtha and other

places supported his family. *“I sat at home for two months. What could be done about it? They employed laman²² people on their farms instead of us. We also rested quietly in our houses.”* However, this did not deter him from claiming the land. He said that even though there was lot of labour work in his village and the labour wages were *“the best in entire Marathwada”* everyone should have their own land for farming. He saw landownership as a means through which he could gain respect. While describing his labour work he would refer to it at times as *gulami-majuri* (slavery-labour work). Although his work on agricultural land during the sowing and harvesting season earned him as much as an average mason would earn in urban areas- which is considered as a high wage for a daily labour- he believed that nothing could substitute ownership of land. For him land was a long time investment, which even if not of high quality could prove as a significant asset in times of emergency. *“Look at those Mahar people who live in the basti. They have support of their land. If they want to buy cattle they get loan by mortgaging portion of their land. Then they pay the mortgage by selling milk/cow dung etc. once the land is free, both the cattle and the land is theirs! We don’t get this profit. Our people without land only earn to eat.”* Kashinath’s description of the land as a source of respect and its significance as a durable asset that could help them in future remained two main reasons for landless Mahars to claim the forest land. These reasons resonated in the aspirations for land among those Mahars who were relatively younger²³ to these people who I have mentioned above and had not personally participated in cultivating forest land along with them in 1992-93.

Manic Ramchandra Savare is a 27 year old mason on building construction sites in Tuljapur. In 1992-93 he was not older than 7yrs. And says he does not remember much about what happened in their village at that time. Some Mahars in this age group repeatedly emphasised on the “changed relationship” between Mahars and Marathas in the village and were not keen to discuss about caste tensions or incidents of atrocities against Mahars. He started cultivating forest land in 2003. Some of his relatives had begun to cultivate that land a year before him. But unlike his older relatives he did not have to face any resistance from the dominant caste. In-fact he said that even though people heard that Mahars were cultivating this land no one cared to even check if

²² Laman is a scheduled tribe in Maharashtra. They were declared as a criminal tribe under British colonial rule. Today they form one of the most marginalized groups in Maharashtra.

²³ Almost 10 years younger brother/cousins or grown up sons of people who had tried to cultivate the forest land in 1992-93.

this news was true. He had tried to sow onion on his patch of land but the crop had failed due to lack of irrigation. However, he said he will continue to sow some crop every season. His partial shift to agriculture from working as a mason, besides other reasons, was also influenced by his Mahar friends and relatives who owned land. Rather than thinking about a possibility of profit, initially he wanted to cultivate land just like those who were of his age had started to work on their *own* land.

“Even though I work in Tuljapur, whenever my friends ask me to help them on their land I never refuse. When I came back home from the hostel after finishing class 10th I stayed back here for one year without doing anything. During that time I used to help my uncles or my friends on their farm. So I know what should I do and how something is done in farming. I felt there was no harm in cultivating a small piece of land, even though there is better income in the cities”.

Few months later I met Manic again outside the village where both of us were waiting to get a *tum-tum*²⁴ to go to Tuljapur. He was going for his daily work. It was a new cropping season where people had started to sow vegetables along with previous standing crops like grapes. I asked him if he had sowed any vegetables. To which he said, *that* land takes his time and effort but gives back nothing, so he decided to not cultivate it for this cropping season. However, it did not mean that the land as such had no value for him. He said he keeps that land because it can be improved. He could not do as much work on that land as he has to go out of the village for work. But he was sure that if he dedicates more time, he can make “his” land more productive. Like others he too believed that forest land will come under his name when the next GR is declared and that will help him and others who cultivate forest land to arrange for irrigation facility. There were few other Mahar families in Kamtha who saw low risk in encroaching forest land with others in 2002-03. They expressed that for them it was an opportunity to claim land but did not want to get into any conflict with the Marathas. When other Mahars began to cultivate the forest land and there was no objection from the other community these families then started to cultivate the land. Hanumnat Datte Sonooni settled in Kamtha after he got married to someone in this village. Unlike most marriages in which common practice is of brides going to the grooms’ house. In his case, he stayed back in Kamtha in his wife’s house. Although he has been living here for more than 20 years people still refer to him as *Mehman* and describe him as someone

²⁴ Tum-tum is a four wheeler auto riksha. It is the most common mode of transport in the village.

who is not from the village. He said he has 2 acres of forest land but he prefers to work as a *mistry* in Tuljapur. For him this land at present is as good as not having a land at all. *“It does not fill our stomach, even if I sow the best crop, with proper manure and irrigation, crops fail”*. His logic for encroaching upon this land was informed by two factors. One that Mahar families were also encroaching the forest land without any violent or other kinds of resistance from the dominant caste. And second that there was a small possibility that in future land entitlement might come to them.

Impact of land ownership on caste relations

In the past two decades Dalit land question has significantly contributed in altering the socio-economic relations of Mahars with the dominant caste in Kamtha. Before 2000 if landlessness and desire to cultivate land was the reality for one section of Mahars, the other section that although rightfully owned land could only cultivate it at bare minimum level. Both the groups in different ways started to claim and assert their ownership on land through institutional or extra institutional means starting in 1992-93 when the first encroachment started on the forest land. Similarly, in 1996 those Mahars, who owned land, were involved in the long drawn out court case to defend their ownership, which continues to the present. Although both these processes of claiming land may appear as independent of the other, each approach has come to remarkably impact Mahars in Kamtha as a community. This section therefore elaborates the ways in which the court case on the land under the Tenancy Act as well as the encroachment on forest land has come to impact individually and in a combined way the politicisation of caste relations in Kamtha.

Identity politics as empowerment

Before meeting Vasant Rokade for longer conversations I met him the first time at Pallavi *tai*'s house. Pallavi *tai* knew that I was worriedly looking for someone to talk about NREGA²⁵ in the village, as there was no one I could find who was working on the programmes under the scheme.

²⁵ My initial fieldwork project was to study the role of participation in empowering Mahars in rights based Schemes like National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS)

One day when she saw Vasant Rokade passing by her house, she immediately shouted his name and called him in. Then she introduced me to him saying “*ask him all you want to know he is the Sarpanch*”. I had hardly talked to him for ten minutes within which several people came and sat around us. Most of these people either carried their ration card or some other documents and papers. They were eager to discuss their issues with him. I continued to ask few questions for next 10 minutes after which I had to stop given his reluctance to answer anything on the employment scheme, and the growing number of people in the room where we sat. Once our conversation stopped others quickly began to talk about their concerns with him. When he left the house, an old woman sighed “*let’s see what will be our luck now*”. I asked her what did she mean and she replied “*now there will be elections let’s see if our men (people) come to power*”.

Later in my conversation with him I learnt that he was the first Mahar deputy *Sarpanch* in Kamtha. He had contested *Panchayat* elections in 1990 and had won the election. Few years later when he mobilized other Mahar families to claim forest land he came under violent attacks by the Marathas. He said “*because of all the conflict and violence I faced, (Mahar) people in the village accepted me as their leader. They elected me to see one of their own to be in the Panchayat*”. He was elected as the member of the Panchayat body in the next elections and in 2006 he was elected as the *Sarpanch* of the village. Besides violent attacks on the lives and property of Mahars, after they first started to encroach on land, they were reprimanded in other forms as well. All the Mahars in the village (irrespective of their land status) were barred from buying anything from the village shops- that were typically owned by the Marathas. Mahars were forced to go to the next village to buy anything of the immediate necessity. Vasant Rokade describes this time “*after the fight people from the village closed their shops for us. They stopped employing us, saying that we will not give anything to Mahar people. We were forced to go Apshingha²⁶ to buy oil, sugar etc. But if they closed their shops for us, then here we opened our own shops*”. As this impacted all the Mahars in the village they decided to start their own shops and refused to buy anything from the shops of the Marathas. Two shops came in Kamtha that were owned and run by the Mahars. One was located on the front side of the village and the second was in *Ambachishet* or *basti* as some people referred to it. These shops still exist in Kamtha and all the Mahars mostly buy things of everyday use from these shops. In my entire

²⁶ Village next to Kamtha

tenure of field work I never came across any Mahar family that bought anything from the Maratha shops. In-fact Mahar shops did not have the service to top up the phone which the Maratha shops had. But even in urgency, either Mahars borrowed their neighbours' phone or went to the next village to top-up their mobile phones. The closing of village shops to Mahars had taken a form of counter retaliation by Mahars. They were rejecting Marathas for the resources that they could afford themselves.

Mobilisation and Assertion

The process of the court case on Mahar Land started a direct and regular interaction of Mahars with the local government office employees. They “befriended” some of “*our own people*” as Jalindher *kaka* shared with me. Knowledge about Government schemes, procedures to claim those schemes and information on other paper works were many times gathered from these offices and through friends that Mahars from Kamtha had made. As I had discussed above that land records for the Mahars in this village were forged by the *Talathi* (village revenue officer) when the case was first filed in the Deputy Collector’s office. The role of friends in this office came handy for Mahars in this case. Although they had their copy of land records that were issued before the changes made in their land documents. The other officers alerted the Mahars to demand additional documents related to land and irrigation in their area in order to establish that the land had passed and was cultivated by them.

The contestation of caste and class position continued with the second phase of encroachment on forest land which started in 2002-03 at a time when Kamtha had a Mahar *Sarpanch* and a Mahar majority in the *Panchayat*. This phase of encroachment was violence free and remained uncontested by any community in the village. *Aaba*²⁷ was a member of *Panchayat* then and pointed to the ‘changed time’ where Mahars had more information and active political power in the village:

²⁷ Krishna Limbaji Rokade, Mahar Farmer who owned land under Tenancy Act

“..violent confrontations and caste tensions ended in this village few years back. Now it’s peaceful but few years back there was lot of tension between Marathas and us. Although other Mahars went to the village temple they (Marathas) didn’t let nana²⁸ enter the temple after he became up-sarpanch (deputy Sarpanch). Most of us don’t go to that temple anymore. As our people started to become members in Panchayat there was better information amongst us. We would know first if there is any government survey in the village or about housing scheme. Knowledge about offices in Tuljapur has expanded amongst Mahars, now they don’t have to even come to ask someone in Panchayat, if they have any work in Tuljapur (government offices) they can go on their own. This is how I see change from before.”

Work and Identity

Krishna Limbaji Rokade or as people called him *aaba* owned 2 acres of land under the Tenancy Act. He worked as a tied labour on the land of a Maratha farmer from the village. This tied labour was called *Salgarhi* where a labour entered into a contract system after taking a loan that ranged from Rs.8, 000-10,000 to work for one year on the farm of the landlord. He took some loan in 1999 and started working as a *salgarhi*. His decision to take this loan was for the marriage of his daughter as his two incomes from the land cultivation and daily labour work were not sufficient to afford the heavy expenditure of a wedding ceremony. His experience as a *salgarhi* is a telling example of caste prejudices and the circumstances that had made possible for the Mahars to challenge such prejudices in the context of Kamtha.

“When a Mahar would take ‘payment’ to work on their land for a year, they would keep a separate dish and food for him. This continued till the year 2000. At that time I used to work at Ambarkhuri²⁹. On the day of ‘Bail poda’³⁰, the malik (landlord) called all the labours working on his land for a meal. When I reached his house they told me that everyone was to bring their own plates and bowls. So I asked them why they can’t serve me in their bowls. I refused to eat in their house and came back to my house to eat. I felt very bad...at that time Mahars did not have any work. They mostly worked on others’ land. But now Mahars are not anymore slaves of Marathas. We work on their farm for 7-8 hours, later they do the payment according to our agreement. Earlier the malik used to decide the payment on his will and would make us work for long hours. Now the hours are

²⁸ Vasant Rokade

²⁹ Farm near the village Kamtha

³⁰ Festival where cattle are decorated and prayer ceremonies done for their long life and good health

fixed and he has to pay us immediately...We are better off now because now we have work...there is so much work in the village that no one anymore works on salgarhi. Now Mahar people are not dependent on one person for their income for the whole year. They can leave him and find work on anyone's land. Payment for labour work within the village has also increased...Others who work in Tuljapur also earns enough as their payment is very high."

Aaba worked on as a *salgarhi* till the year 2000. He was one of the last Mahars to be a Salgarhi and his compulsion to enter into this feudal practice was directly related to the limited support for the Mahar farmers in this area but a phenomenon that Dalit farmers faced across India³¹. Aaba's quote highlighted the dual existence of Mahar's continued dependency on Marathas for their livelihood and at the same time Mahar's assertiveness by rejecting common forms of caste based discriminatory practices like using separate bowls for eating at the landlord's house. The enormity of change in Mahars' perception of their caste status vis-à-vis Marathas' dominant status was apparent from the expression like "end of Mahar slavery" and "changing modes and decisions" around payment of Mahar labours. This was further illustrated in the conversations with Papu Sonevane who shared that in the absence of any government help in irrigation facility for Mahar's farm they had to collectively buy a motor pump and build their own pipeline connected to the farm well in order to facilitate better irrigation on their farm. He expressed that Mahars had to collectively work for themselves. Comparing the ways of life for Mahars from the past to the present assertiveness and insistence of Mahars for "proper" payments in cash he said the following:

"Long before Mahars were assigned the work of carrying dead carcasses out of the village. And when it was the time of 'sugi'³² Mahars had to clean and tie many bags of grain and bring it to their house. In return they would take out a bowl full of that grain (ek tokri anaj) and give it to Mahars and say now go and share it and eat it with your children. Now we laugh at them if they give us such payments. Can an entire family survive on a bowl of grains, they should first show if they can survive on it. We are united in this village. We all go to work together and ask for payments. Most of the gotedars (contractors) are our people and they negotiate payments on our be-half".

³¹ More on this in chapter 4

³² Annual harvest season where crops were harvested, cleaned and packed

Conclusion

Land was a defining element that shaped the social and political mobilisation of Mahars and disturbed the status quo of caste relations in Kamtha. Their struggle for land was rooted in the historical exclusive privileges of the ritually higher caste- which Mahars had challenged by engaging the “neutral state” and actively demanding their share of power in the post colonial state.

Chapter 3

Reverse need? : Changing agrarian practice and caste relations in Kamtha

Introduction

Once I settled in *ambachishet*, I started following *Atul bhaiya* and through him others to observe their everyday lives. This also helped me to participate in their work and conversations after work hours, to understand the correlation between occupational practices and caste relation in the village. In-order to familiarise myself with the other parts of Kamtha, I began to collect basic information through a household survey. While collecting this information some families in the Maratha area of the village would ask about my personal details. They would then derive a direct co-relation between my caste and education level. They would exclaim “*you are in 20th class*³³!” And then reason it out by saying “*Baman hai*” (she is a Brahmin). Similarly in Mahar area my caste and work would coincide when people introduced me to their distant relatives saying in an obvious manner that I will become a teacher as I am a Brahmin. However, it was difficult for me to draw a similar correlation between people and their caste specific work in Kamtha, especially where caste occupation was considered degrading and ritually impure. There was only one Kumbhar³⁴ man who still made earthenware and sculptures in the village, though he shared that his children were disinterested in it and wanted to work in the city. Except his family no other caste from the lower social status performed their caste occupation. For instance, Mali another OBC caste who were traditionally the gardeners and in-charge of the temple garden, were now working mostly as farm labourers, taxi drivers or construction workers. Some of the family members of this community were also employed at the village *panchayat* and at block level government offices. Similarly, Mahars the ex-untouchables who performed caste specified work like removing dead animal’s carcasses even in 1980s, refused to do any of this work now. They form a big group of farm labourers, who also cultivate their own land and construction workers

³³ People here usually counted under graduation and post graduation years like school years. So if school was till class 12th. 1st year of under graduation would be 13th class and so on.

³⁴ Kumbhars were traditionally the potters in the caste structure. In the Indian constitution they have been categorized as the Other Backward Castes (OBC).

in the village. The exception, however, was in the case of the dominant caste. Marathas, who were ritually placed higher than the Malis and the Mahars, also owned on an average more land than the other two castes. Labour work on their farms has been the source of livelihood for many landless and marginal landholders in the village. Many are still directly dependent for the farm labour work on their land. This dependency of Mahar labourers and of other caste groups on Maratha land reflected the unequal economic relationship, where hierarchically lower caste groups were still not free from their previous dependency on the ritually higher caste.

Nevertheless, while describing their work, especially on the farms of Marathas, Mahars said that they rarely face any caste discrimination. They would often compare the lives and hardships of their parents to describe their own improved conditions in the context of caste and work. For instance, several Mahars who worked as farm labourers said, *“It is up to us if we want to work. If we don’t like someone or the payment is not good then we can leave their work. Unlike old days we are not in debt to work for anyone. There is plenty of work around. So it is not a problem for us”*. Mahars would state their economic status as *garib* (poor) and did not see their dependency for work on Maratha land as a continuation of the caste practice. In-fact, they proudly claimed that Marathas don’t stop calling them on their (mobile) phone until they agree to work on their land. Maratha landowners also shared that they face difficulty in arranging adequate number of farm labour as *“they (Mahars) have become arrogant and disrespectful”*.

The above two quotes highlight the continuity of Mahar dependency on Marathas for labour work and yet there is a change in their labour relations where Mahars have confidence on their labour power reinforced with a sense of pride with the knowledge that Marathas need them. These changes are the result of mobility amongst Dalit labourers in Kamtha, where they moved away from the farm work and found earning opportunities in the cities. Projects of development like urbanization in Tuljapur and other nearby cities created jobs where Mahars worked as masons (*mistri*), building construction supervisors, mechanics and drivers. At the same time within the village, with the introduction of labour intensive cash crops Mahars began to mobilize themselves to negotiate for higher labour wages and demanded better work conditions like transportation facilities when they had to travel outside Kamtha for work. Those Mahars who marginally owned land also started cultivating cash crop for the market.

In this chapter therefore by discussing Mahars' stories about their changing work trajectory in the last two decades I show how the local and regional economy has been changing and how these changes have come to impact the local caste and labour relations. In the first section I discuss the decade of the 1990s when out migration amongst Mahars was the highest. I show their economic situation within Kamtha that pushed them to migrate to cities and the nature of work that they found at the destinations where they had migrated. In the second section I discuss the changing agrarian practice in Kamtha as a pull factor for migrants to return. In the third section I show how Marathas perceive economic mobility of Mahars and describe its impact on their requirement for labourers. I conclude by saying that although labour relations are typically enmeshed within caste relations in an agrarian society, in Kamtha through labour mobility and opening of earning opportunities outside the farm labour work along with diversification of agrarian economy, it has created a space for negotiation and contestation for better wages and work conditions even when they are significantly dependent on labour work on the lands of the dominant castes.

The 'then': caste, work and migration

Tuljapur is the nearest market from Kamtha. Some Mahar families from *ambachishet* came here to sell fruits and vegetables. Ranjana *tai* would come to this market three or four times a week to sell vegetables that she grew on her farm and fruits that she collected from the forest area. She was a regular seller in this market for last few years. I usually met her at the vegetable market or on *tum tum* while travelling from one side to the other. I asked her if I could talk about her work and she invited me to sit with her in the market while she did the business. She said "*when I am home I have to take care of the shop, home and kaka, but in mandi (market) I have no work other than talking*". She usually came to the market around eleven in the morning and sat till six in the evening. One day we travelled together from Kamtha to Tuljapur and she began to tell me how road and transportation has improved in their area. When she came to Kamtha after her marriage she began to work with her husband and other family members on other's farms. She said they

had to walk to go to anyone's farm outside Kamtha because ST³⁵ buses were few and did not come on time. At that time the only work available in the village and surrounding areas was of cutting grass called *khurpayi* work. Her daily wages was Rs.5 and when she worked on digging the well in the village she earned Rs.7-10. Her family was dependent on the seasonal rain to cultivate their land. Even when they sowed some crops (like moth commonly known as *matki*, green gram, green chickpeas, sorghum etc.) it was only for self subsistence. She stayed in the village and worked on other's farms while her husband used to migrate to the cities especially to Pune for half a year to work on construction sites. Her first experience of working outside the farm labour work was when she and other women from Kamtha began to take up the social forestry work. She said the payment was high in this work as they were paid Rs.12 at that time. She found it easier than working on other's farm. As she said "*working in the nursery*³⁶ *was easy and we worked in shade. We used to go in a group to the nursery and come back together. It was near the village so it was easy. After that I never worked on anyone's farm. I only worked on my farm*". Ranjana *tai* worked on the nursery for two years and combined farm labour work with it. Her reason for not working on other's farms in later years was because she had started a shop in *ambachishet* and had regularly begun to cultivate her own land. When her husband returned to Kamtha to stay permanently they decided to cultivate their land and sow onion- a cash crop. Talking to Ranjana *tai* was intriguing because in her narrative of work, caste never occurred as a prominent issue. Even though she worked on Maratha land for many years and her husband described that work as exploitative where they worked for long number of hours with low wages, Ranjana *tai* never described these difficulties in caste terms. She spoke about difficulties in terms of distance that she had to cover for work, long working hours in the sun and no time to rest. This was a significant difference between conversations with Mahar women and men. Her husband was more vocal about the caste prejudices in the village and shared that he migrated to Pune because they did not have enough to eat. The income from the labour work was insufficient to take care of his family and parents and it became harder once they had children. Further describing their economic situation during those days he said that Mahars lived in thatched roof huts (*kota*) made of sugarcane leaves. These houses dripped during rainy season but they

³⁵ State Transport

³⁶ Work under Social Forestry consisted of maintaining plant nursery and planting trees. Most people in the village referred to this work as 'nursery work'.

couldn't do anything about it. He moved to Pune with another Mahar man from Kamtha who had a distant relative there. This relative found them the *gaundi* (building construction) work. Although he could not save much money from his work in Pune, he describes that work as a "different" experience. When I asked him to elaborate the differences he experienced, he said

"City mein log hi alag hain (people in city are different). In the village people always fought. But in cities people did not fight as much. Here (village) no matter how much you worked, Mahar people were always poor. But in the city you get paid according to your work. If you work hard you earn more money".

Describing those days he stated that only Mahars worked on Maratha's land and they paid according to their wish. In another conversation when I asked him if Maratha families have also encroached upon the forest land, he laughed and said *"they owned all the land in the village why would they encroach"*. Conversations with Mahar men on the inter-relationship between caste and poverty were more frequent and elaborative than Mahar women. Similar to *Ranjana tai's* experiences on farm and nursery work was Shobha mausi's story. For some years like *Ranjana tai* she worked on other's farms and then moved with other women to work on the nursery. Although she earned better wages in the nursery her experience of working there was not good. The in-charge of the nursery would misbehave with women and Shobha *mausi* felt extremely unsafe while working there. She shared that if women protested or scolded him, then he would assign difficult task to them or asked them to leave the work. Although she owned land farming was not a choice for her. In the absence of any irrigation facility, at that time, she sowed minimal crops (small amount of ground-nuts) on her farm. She said they were dependent on the rainy season and if it didn't rain then they were prepared for their crops to get spoiled. Her husband worked on other's farms as daily wage labourer. Blaming her family members she said that whatever they earned was taken away by her husband's brother- as they lived together in one family. She complained that most of the men were (and are) alcoholic and they spent all the income on liquor. With precarious income and constant family fights her husband and she migrated to Pune to find work. They moved to a rural part of Pune called Shikarpur and then worked at several places. Describing that phase of life as the most difficult time she said they first worked on construction work, but soon moved to work on sugarcane farms. She describes it in following words:

“We had enough to eat but couldn’t earn to buy clothes. Your kaka and I kept moving from one sugarcane farm to another in search of work. We also worked on eent bhatti (brick kiln). Like this we spent more than one year. From Pune we went to Satara-my mother’s place to find work. But within one month we returned to Kamtha because there was no work and we couldn’t continue to live there. I stayed back in Kamtha to work as a farm labourer. But your kaka went to Pune to stay at his sister’s house and started cutting wood to sell it in the market. He returned to Kamtha after six months and worked as a farm labourer for one year. After one year we again migrated to Pune and lived there for another year. After that we came back to Kamtha and never went anywhere again”.

The meager income from the farm labour work and temporary employment that Shobha *mausi* perceived as unsafe in the ‘nursery’ work combined with the absence of any government support policies like irrigation facilities for Mahars made migration as a more promising way of finding better work and higher income. However, as she shares that their regular movement from one farm to the other and continuous migration to different villages did not help them in making their situation better. In-fact even though they owned land, their situation was not much different from those Mahars in Kamtha who did not own land. Like Shobha *mausi*, though much later, Atul *Bhaiya* also migrated to Pune in search of work. When he was 8 or 9 years old his parents worked under the contract called ‘*salgarhi*’ for a local landlord who had many such contract labourers working on his land. His mother described that time as “*mushkil ka samay*” (difficult times). She shared, “*there was not enough to eat and we had no option other than working on his (landlord’s) farm*”. Under *salgarhi*- an advance payment was made to the contract labourer also called a tenant who would then cultivate the land for one year. But usually the work of cultivating the land was extended to every other kind of work related to land, crops, cattle etc. of the landlords. The tenant family was expected to work at any hour of need and their “extra work” was compensated by giving some grain at the time of harvest or leftover food during religious or other ceremonies. Over this period of contract the tenant family was expected to stay on the farm. As Atul *Bhaiya* described he too worked with his mother on the farm. He was in class 4th when his parents moved to work on *Salgarhi*.

Atul *bhaiya*’s mother still works on her field and goes to a distant market to sell the farm produce. When I asked her why instead of cultivating her land, she and her husband chose to work on *salgarhi*, she replied land was not enough to sustain them. She said whatever they grew on their land was not sufficient to feed the family and it was not enough to sell in the market.

Land as such was not a guarantee to escape hunger and therefore led them to take the year long contract labour work. To cultivate the land a combination of factors like healthy seeds and irrigation facilities formed the priority but Mahars did not have access to these. Other big landlords that employed electric pumps could afford to invest in the extra expenditure like electricity or a new well to irrigate their farms. Thus, the investment and profit returns ratio allowed them to continue cultivating their land- which for them was a sustainable source of income.

Atul *bhaiya*'s father continued to be a *salgarhi* for another two years but he was sent to a hostel in Gurgaon³⁷. He dropped out of the school when he did not pass the class 10th exams. And after one year he went to Pune where his aunt's family (father's sister) found him a job in a factory as a line man. He worked there for two years. He said he earned enough to buy a scooter and liked working in the city. But he had to return to Kamtha as his father needed his help in farming.

Similar to Atul *bhaiya*'s experience Baba *bhaiya* also migrated to Pune to work as a security guard. He was forced to drop out of the school because of the pressing needs at his home. His father had passed away and he had to leave the school to start working along with his mother. The wage labour work in Kamtha was too little for his family to survive. Baba *bhaiya* mortgaged his land to one of his relatives and migrated to Pune to earn and repay the mortgage. He argued that he mortgaged the land to a relative because there is a guarantee of getting it back when he repays the loan. But he didn't trust the village moneylender (a Muslim family) or Maratha landlords. He stayed in Pune for four five years and worked as a security guard in a factory. He also gave tuition classes for school going children to earn extra income from it. When he returned to Kamtha he had enough savings to repay the loan and free his land.

Unlike the above mentioned four people Dipali Jeevant Rokade's family was landless. Her family members worked on other's farms as daily wage labourers. However, she declared in the beginning of our conversation that she does not go out anywhere to work even though her mother-in-law still does. Her Husband Jeevant Rokade also works as a farm wage labourer though only for half a day. As he spends the other half (morning) working in a nearby city hospital. Jeevant's parents worked as a *Salghari* on the same land as Atul *bhaiya*'s parents and

³⁷ A village near Kamtha. Most Mahar boys even today go to this hostel to complete their schooling.

many others. His mother shared that even though it was a lot of work, in *salgarhi* they could get food to eat regularly. Even when his father was tied to the land, Jeevant dropped out of school and moved to Pune with his other friends to find work. His decision was based on the information from his friends that there was lot of work (earning opportunities) in Pune. He had seen his other relatives from Kamtha moving out to Pune which also influenced his decision. Working in the cities changed his perspectives in two ways. First, it changed his perspective on how people lived, ate and dressed in cities as different from his village. He said he felt ‘free’ and ‘without tension’ in Pune. Narrating an incident that had an impact on him he said, once he went to a *dhaba*³⁸ with his friends to have dinner. They began to chat with the boy who was serving them food and figured out that he was a Maratha. In his surprise he said to himself “*see I am being served by a Maratha*”. For him, this was a change from the routinised caste way of life in the village. The second change was his outlook on work and income. He shared that in cities “*it was easier to convert hard work into money which is difficult in the village*”. He worked as a labourer on construction sites that he described as difficult work with not enough payment. He said the wages were higher than he could ever earn in Kamtha but in the city he had to pay the room rent and spend much more on food. So he was unable to save much from his income in Pune. He worked there for two years and then moved to Osmanabad (near Kamtha) to continue working on the construction sites. He said that in Osmanabad he earned as much as in Pune but saved more money. He spent another three years in Osmanabad. After that he returned to Kamtha to work on farms that cultivated cash crops and began working in a government hospital as a peon.

Rajendra Ramesh kamble worked as a driver in Tuljapur. He dropped out of the school at an early age and started working with his parents as a farm labourer on other’s land. He also worked on rural development projects like road construction, digging well and tree plantation. But he soon left this work because as he reasoned it to be a very hard work without any proper wages. He said their region is rocky and digging earth was the most difficult work but they would earn only Rs.25 a day. At the same time the work was temporary for not more than 15-20 days and after that they had to return to work on other’s farms. He decided to move to Osmanabad in order to find work which was more regular and with higher wages. Through a relative he found work

³⁸ Roadside restaurants/eating place

as a cook in a college canteen where he worked for two years. He shared that he enjoyed working as a cook and interacting with other college boys. Calling it as the “*best time*” he said that it was very different from living in the village. He met students from different regions of Maharashtra and even from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. However, after two years his parents called him back because they had arranged his marriage. He returned to Kamtha started working as a driver.

All these families whether landed or landless found themselves heavily dependent on daily wage work that was mostly found on the dominant caste lands. Many amongst these also entered the tied labour work called *salgarhi* as a secured means of food availability even with the knowledge of their exploitation. Most people described their reason as *mushkil samay* (difficult time) to work as a *salgarhi*. Asking people to elaborate on the meaning of difficult time was both tough and emotional for them. When I asked Atul *bhaiya* a few times to explain what he meant by difficult time he blurted

“Don’t you know? What did we have then? No proper food, no slippers, no electricity or extra clothes. We did not have a fan. Was it all there? Now most of the houses have motorcycles. Wherever we want to go, at whatever time we can go. Was this possible before? During those days we had to only work to fill our stomach. There was no rest- but not anymore”.

Reflecting upon “those” days by contrasting it from their present economic condition and certain facilities which Mahars can avail now was the most illuminating aspect of Mahar assertion and change. All the families that I talked to, people I interviewed, and from many other informal conversations there was a clear distinction between the past that it was and a present-‘the now’. The distinction between ‘that’ time and ‘this’ was most often perhaps because it is easily accessible and more tangible, were discussed and presented in the form of material resources and facilities that they have now or lacked before. It then leads to the nature of work they did before, what they produced, consumed and the nature of shift in it. These resources today as many mentioned were in the form of concrete houses that Mahar families have begun to construct under *Indira Awas Yojana* (Government’s housing scheme), the number of cattle they have or the kind of crop they cultivate. However these material resources were not the end in themselves. These resources were producing and in turn were getting extended through another

set of resources like people and their many different ideas. Nature of Mahar assertion in Kamtha for their rights, dignity and for their economic mobility was constitutional as well as extra constitutional. Their assertion to a great extent was influenced by their spatial mobility and socio-economic interaction outside the village. Their new experiences and ideas about self and work were employed to engage with the changing agrarian practices in the village, legal provisions they could avail to acquire land and different methods and means through which they could re-negotiate their social and economic positionality vis-à-vis other village communities.

The ‘now’: return migration, caste and work

Today all the Mahar families who own land cultivate cash crops like grapes and onion. Even if their crop fails in one season, they don't hesitate in taking further loans to re-invest in these crops with the hope that they will get better returns. By an informal estimation almost 70 per cent of the entire land in Kamtha was cultivated for cash crop especially Grapes. Onion and soyabean are the other cash crops that people cultivate. The shift to cash crop occurred in Kamtha over a period of time and various factors contributed in this change. With the shift towards the liberalization of the Indian economy, horticulture sector gained a central place for export of food products. Since 1991, Maharashtra has the highest food acreage in India and grape is its fourth largest fruit crop in this state. Praising globalised nature of grape exports from Maharashtra Rath (2003:1) notes that “Liberalisation as a process leads to the industrialization of the agriculture” which benefits the “vulnerable and powerless population”. He further notes that with increased focus of the government to enhance export capabilities of the horticulture sector several “farmer” co-operatives were formed. Giving the example of one of the biggest co-operatives *Mahagrape* which was formed in 1991 in Maharashtra, Roy and Thorat (2008:3) claim that without political and institutional support such co-operatives would never succeed. They claim that such co-operatives like *mahagrape* work as a facilitator for farmers (big or marginal) in providing marketing expertise and technical assistance and inputs to produce a quality crop. In Kamtha most of the initial members in this co-operative were landowners who owned five acres or more and all the members were from Maratha community. Large scale grape cultivation started here in the year 1989-1990. A decade later Mahars also started cultivating grapes. However, even today

Mahars sell their farm produce by searching market and buyers on their own and not through the co-operatives.

Decision of Mahars to shift to cash crop had also been influenced by the experiences of other marginal farmers. Ranjana *tai's* husband Suraj Rokade saw that the Muslim families in the village who also had small landholdings had started to cultivate onions. Thinking about a possibility of profit that these onion growers gained he decided to sow the crop. It was a newly introduced crop that marginal farmers who owned 2-3 acres had begun to sow since late 1990s. Although marginal landholders like him used to cultivate their land it was mostly for subsistence. Cash crops required high investment and were water intensive thus were not part of their crop selection. As a result for the entire 1990s and early 2000 most Mahar families who owned land worked on Maratha land on such cash crops. The high value crop was seen as something that rich and powerful grew. As Suraj Rokade said *“pehle ye sab bade log hi lagate the”* (earlier only big people cultivated such crops). In 1998-99 the first bore well was dug outside the Maratha community by Muslim farmers. Through their connections of relatives and search of market they began to sell their cash crop in the Hyderabad market. This export of cash crop and subsequent profit influenced other landed Mahars. For those who had migrated outside Kamtha like Suraj Rokade were able to find work on relatively higher wages. They saved savings from this income and through an additional loan from the village moneylender (*sahukar*) they were able to collectively make a pipeline and buy a motor pump for themselves. Sharing the story about this water pump he says:

“We approached the gram Panchayat to know if kisan (farmer) who are poor can also get a pipeline [for irrigation]. But we were told that those who owned the land were not eligible for government's help. We had to arrange it ourselves. But none of us had the money to dig a pipeline. We then decided to collect money from everyone so that it benefits all of us. Now you see every Mahar has a green farm!”

Cultivating onion- a cash crop started a direct contact between Mahar farmers and market. Not having any previous experience in selling their crops in a big market and especially outside Maharashtra, these farmers began to travel to Hyderabad and Bangalore to find wholesale market as these were the destinations where farmers from other communities also sold their crops. The “fun trips” that young boys and their fathers had while going to these “new” places increased

their confidence in this new venture. As Kumar Ranjana Tai's son said "*we didn't understand their language, and their food was so different..but we earned lot of money*".

Along with the increase in the cultivation of cash crops amongst Marginal farmers, especially Mahars, the wage rate had also increased for the farm labour work. By the time Mahars started to sow onion and locate a market for themselves the other big landholders had begun to cultivate grapes at an enormous level. Besides being water intensive crop, grape farming was also a labour intensive process. With the increased interest of big landlords in cultivating and exporting grapes, their need for labourers on farm also increased. The demand for labourers was unprecedented and it increased the competition amongst grape growers across many villages. For the arrangement of labourers, big landlords usually contacted local labour contractors called *mukkadam*. These contractors then arranged and supplied labourers, they were also responsible for negotiating wages and arranging and finding work in and nearby the village. The wages as a result increased at a significant rate and the work of a *mukkadam* gained prominence.

Atul *bhaiya* was asked to come back to Kamtha because his father needed him to help with cultivating onion on their land. He also joined his other family members to work on other's farms. Within a year they started sowing grapes. For this cash crop to compete in the market it needed particular seed variety, medicines, method of irrigation and certain cultivating processes that are exclusive to grapes. Atul *bhaiya* and others learnt these skills while working on others' lands. Instead of receiving any formal training and instructions as the big farmers had, Mahar and other marginal farmers learnt these processes through their labour work. Most of their required instruments and tools were made with the things that were available in their homes, so that they could spend on those tools and plant medicines that they cannot make. For instance, the frame of a vineyard was one of the most expensive parts of the grape farming. Big farmers invested into iron poles and iron strings on which the plant grew. Most of these farmers complained that government was not helping them enough as they only provided the frame and no subsidy on plant medicines etc. In contrast Atul *bhaiya* and others used poles made of wood. This wood was arranged either by cutting trees in their area or in the forest. Many times families among them exchanged their surplus items with those that they needed, like they would barter wood logs for plastic drums etc. They had also received some government help. During my field

work Mahar farmers had submitted an application to get some tools for cultivating their land. Following this there was an inspection by officers from the *Panchayat Samiti* (block council) on their farm land. Their applications were approved and each family received a spraying pump³⁹ and a spade. With this combination of innovating new ways of cultivation (which Mahar farmers could afford), exchange of tools within the family and limited government help Atul *bhaiya* and others began to cultivate cash crops.

Besides making a shift to cash crops he also started working as a *mukkadam* after few years. For him this was a better way of earning than doing just labour work. He stated that it was easy to learn a *mukkadam*'s work and once he knew how to arrange labourers, he started negotiating wages and work conditions with the landlords. As a contractor he mobilized his family members and relatives to work with him. By counting only his number of relatives from Kamtha, he had a large workforce. Describing his work as a contractor he said:

“It was easy for me to learn a mukkadam’s work. I observed how they worked- like arranging labourers and talking to khet malik (landlord). People in the village knew that I have become a mukkadam because I would tell khet-malik that I can arrange labourers. Soon other big landlords from neighbouring villages began to approach me. Now if any landlord approaches me I ask them to pay a certain amount, if they agree to pay that amount then we work on their farm.”

Besides his commission and labourers' wages he also negotiates for expenditure on transportation, first aid and money for evening and afternoon tea. Given the rigorous work on grape crops, people often worked for ten hours or more with small breaks. Under their contract they could take a lunch break for an hour and tea breaks for half an hour each. Often women complained of headache and fatigue while they worked on the farm. Atul *bhaiya* reasoned that the landlord should pay if someone falls ill as they were working on his land. Other contractors although bought tea and cigarettes from their own commission money for the labourers, Atul *bhaiya* however said that most of the people working with him were his *chachi*, *atya* and *vahini* (female relatives) and if he was not careful and they fell ill, the blame will be on his head. Thus, he asks the landlord to pay extra money for the first aid. This was his way of dealing with the labourers/relatives and the landlord.

³⁹ Used for spraying plant medicines



Atul bhaiya's wife (right most) and other relatives going for work

At the time of my fieldwork he had been a contractor for more than five years and his relatives had consistently worked with him. For him the caste relations had changed a lot. After he became a *mukkadam* he claims that he has to go to Maratha houses for negotiating wages or receiving payments. These meetings often take place inside the Maratha houses where he is offered tea. For him this change in Maratha's approach towards Mahars is because Mahars are united and work as a group. He explained that if they practiced "*chua choot* (untouchability) *it will become difficult for them to arrange as many labourers as I do*". Thus for him with the changing agrarian economy of the village the caste relations were also transforming.

For other labourers who worked with Atul *bhaiya* also largely agreed that there has been a change in caste attitude, but at the same time also highlighted those incidents where discrimination plays out. Baba *bhaiya* worked with Atul *bhaiya* for few years. After he returned from Pune, he started working on grape farms in and around Kamtha. He shared that "one percent" of Marathas still practiced discrimination on their farm. It mostly plays out in the break

time where “*maliks*” (landlords) eat separately or don’t share their water. Recounting one such incident he said:

“Once during the lunch break we ran out of drinking water. At some distance the landlord’s water pot was kept, so I went and poured some for myself and then for others. He was watching us from the distance while clearing the farm. After we finished eating and got back to work, he threw all the water away from the pot saying that I had forgotten to cover back the pot and flies fell in the water. We knew that he was lying and he believed in chua-choot (untouchability), but we did not say anything”.

However, he said that they don’t misbehave either verbally or physically with them. According to him after the ‘atrocities act’⁴⁰ Marathas have completely stopped using violence or abusive language as “*they are scared of the law but not people*”. Others too agreed that even if Maratha landowners believed in caste discrimination they never showed it and “*kept it inside*”.

However, Baba *bhaiya* did not continue to work with Atul *bhaiya* on several grape farms and worked only on one farm in Kamtha. He often said that he could earn enough from one farm and did not feel the need to go to different places to earn. His initial working on several grape farms was intended to free his land that he had mortgaged to Atul *bhaiya*’s family. After he repaid the loan he began to cultivate his land and worked on one other farm as a daily wage labour. For him cultivating his farm with cash crop had brought much change in his economic situation, even though he chose to sow onion and not grapes on his land. He was the only landed Mahar who used major portion of the land for food crops for subsistence and minimal for the cash crop. Although other families did cultivate a small amount of vegetables like aubergine or groundnut, most of the land was dedicated to onion or grapes. Baba *bhaiya* chose food crops over cash crops because he shared that he couldn’t afford the high and regular investment in grape farming, thus also making onion cropping more favourable for him as it was less risky in case the crop failed. Talking about new agrarian practice and cultivation of cash crop amongst Mahars he said that it has ended hunger in the Mahar households. Giving his example he said that previously their situation was much worse than other relatives but after he started cultivating the land their economic situation has become much better. Reflecting upon the changing nature of work in

⁴⁰ The Scheduled caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, under which few Maratha men were booked in 1990s after some Mahars complained of discrimination.

agriculture he said that people were becoming too restless for money. He said he chose to not work with Atul *bhaiya* on several grape farms because he was satisfied with his income.

Shobha *mausi*'s family also did not work with Atul *bhaiya* on other's farms and mainly took care of their land and cattle. Her son occasionally (peak harvest season) asked Atul *bhaiya* to find work for him as the payment was the highest during that period. When they returned to Kamtha after their traumatic years of migration several things had changed in Kamtha that worked in their favour. In the village Mahar families had already begun to cultivate cash crops for every season. Also, the *Gram Panchayat* had a majority of Mahar members. In her description she said that her husband and she decided to grow cash crop because everyone around them grew it and earned profit from it. For her it was an obvious choice to imitate other Mahar families in growing cash crops. However, she began to cultivate her own land, when her brothers helped her to get a property division from her husband's family. Other Mahars had also divided their land amongst different brothers at the time when they started cultivating cash crops. Her husband although initially worked as a farm labourer, he soon began to cultivate his land and stopped working on other's farms. Through the *Gram Panchayat* they learnt about the Maharashtra government's scheme of selling subsidized cattle and goats. Along with Shobha *mausi* many others had commented that they became aware of several government schemes for Scheduled caste families once "their people" were elected in the *Panchayat*. Making use of this scheme she invested in buying animals from the animal husbandry department. There were families who bought big animals like cows and buffaloes from the Government's scheme and started a dairy business from home. However, she bought goats and as their number started increasing she began to sell them in the Osmanabad market. This was a major source of profit for her family. In few years their economic status became comparatively much better than other Mahar families, who at times made fun of them, calling them as *bade admi* (big/rich people). *Bade admi*- used as a sarcastic description of Shobha *mausi*'s family by other Mahars was also related to the fact that unlike others she did not allow her daughter to work outside home. Throughout my stay in Kamtha I did not see Kanchan, Shobha *mausi*'s daughter working in anyone's farm, not even her own. In the peak harvesting season labour wages went as high as Rs.500 per day. Almost all adult members (which in the village meant attaining the age of 13 or 14) made the most of this season to increase the family income. Shobha *mausi*'s affordability to not send her daughter for work had

as much to do with her economic security as well as making a statement to her relatives about her economic status. She often resented her relatives for not helping her when they were forced to migrate outside Kamtha.

She further stated that Marathas had become friendlier to Mahars than Mahars were to each other. She reasoned it by saying that caste discrimination had ended in the village but fights between Mahars had increased. She was referring to her own experience with her husband's family and their property dispute. But also to another experience where because of internal division between Mahars, they were unable to elect a *Sarpanch* from their own community and a new *Sarpanch* from the Maratha community was elected. Shobha *mausi's* comments pointed to the class like formation even within the small Mahar group in Kamtha. Although Mahars in Kamtha were never a homogenous group as some had land and others were landless. With the cultivation of cash crops for one group and permanent non-farm work outside the village for others (landless Mahars) this difference became more glaring. Both sides saw their work and income as more secure than the other. Those Mahars who worked in the cities also saw their work as much better than doing labour work on other's farms. The biggest difference that they drew between farm labourers and themselves was that they did not need their entire family to work outside in order to earn. This was more specifically referred to the wives of those Mahar men who worked in the city, who did not work outside the home, while the entire family including the wives of the landed Mahars had to labour to earn.

Jeevant Rokade's family did not own land in Kamtha and he worked as a farm labourer and was also employed in a government hospital as a peon. Sharing his work experience in the hospital, he said he would like to continue working in the hospital and not on other's farms. For him hospital work was stable and he did not have to go to several villages or farms to search for work. Commenting on work conditions he said that on the farm one had to spend whole day in the sun and there was no proper rest. However, inside the hospital building the work was much easier and convenient for him. His wife Dipali also preferred working in the cities. She did not work in the farm and stayed at home even though her husband and his parents worked as farm labourers. She shared, those women who worked as farm labourers, worked as hard but earned less than men and then they had to take care of the home as well. She saw her family's economic

condition better than these women and said therefore she does not need to go out in the field and work. Similar, to Depali, Rajendra Ramesh Kamble's wife also stayed at home and did not go out for work. Her husband worked as a driver for a travel agency in Tuljapur. She shared that although her husband does not own any land, she feels that they have a better earning opportunity. Although the wage rates on farm work have increased she feels that they are not dependent on others to earn income. 'Outside work' as she calls her husband's work is more independent where they can earn as much as they work. Her husband also agreed with her saying, that they have never cultivated land so they don't have any knowledge about agriculture or cultivation. Contrasting non-farm work in the cities with farm work he said:

"There are more opportunities to earn outside- in the city and the availability of work is throughout the year. You can earn as much as you work. However, it is not the same with the farm work. For those who cultivate their land, are dependent on rain to find work. If it does not rain- like this year, then they are left without work and income. Since people have started sowing grapes the wage rate has increased, for small farmers it is an additional burden because they will have to employ labourers on their farm to work and spend a lot of money on their wages. I don't see any profit in this. What are they left with in the end?"

In the return migration period and settling back in Kamtha, the work trajectory of Mahars became diverse. Most Mahars who owned land started to sow cash crops and worked as farm labourers. While landless Mahars found work mostly on construction sites in Tuljapur and other work such as drivers, garage mechanic etc. Their increased economic mobility and decline in complete dependency as wage labourers on Maratha's land had influenced their social relations with other communities in the village. This was expressed by Mahars by saying that caste relations had improved and there were no more caste- violence in the village. While Maratha landlords expressed it by saying that they felt "helpless" and "harassed" by Mahars as few Mahars instigated others to pressurize them for higher wages. As Ramkrishna Jamdare, the biggest Maratha farmer in Kamtha said, *"Government does not provide any help to us even though we are poor farmers. They should atleast help us with paying wages, labourers can work under hami rozgar (NREGA) on our farm and government should pay their wages. This way they will help both the farmer and the labourer"*. In the following section I will discuss how the changing agrarian practices have affected Maratha farmers and what they say as landlords about their changing relations with the Mahar labour.

Caste relations and work: Maratha version

Each Maratha family on an average held more land than Mahar or any other community in the village. In 1990s besides cultivating their own land most of the families had a member working permanently in an off farm job. They also had their own businesses in Tuljapur and all the shops in Kamtha were owned by them. Some from this community were teachers in the government school. They had much higher representation in *Gram Panchayat*, *Panchayat Samiti* and *Zila Parishad* and were actively involved in the elections at all these levels. The biggest Maratha farmers at this time were involved in sugarcane cultivation. They were deeply integrated into the Market system and this integration was helped through state initiatives. In several conversations these farmers who previously grew Sugarcane as their main crop complained that government was no more sympathetic to them. That previously government subsidies and support prices helped them to negotiate with the market however now they were completely discriminated against. I had described before about the availability and ownership of shops in Kamtha that mostly served the Marathas.

With the continuous experience of farming, knowledge about- proper seeds, better mode of irrigation and government schemes increased amongst Maratha farmers. This also helped them in making better deals in the wholesale market. Thus, these factors cumulatively increased their profit many times. Whereas Mahars had begun to cultivate their land only a decade ago, Maratha farmers had been experimenting with new seeds and crops since the 1960s. One such conversation with Maske *dada*, a prosperous Maratha farmer, who shared his experiences of farming, showed how state and market have favourably shaped his community.

“When in 1962-64 aushad beej (genetically modified seeds) were introduced in the market our condition improved. It took me ten years to learn to do proper farming on which I could earn good profit. Then ‘others’ like you told us which seeds to use etc. and it helped us to improve our crops. We were given these ideas for better farming. Due to water shortage in this area I took loan from the government bank to build an irrigation infrastructure. Government has been supporting us. For instance, for grapes, government gives Rs.10, 000 per acre. This has been very helpful. The iron frames on which grape vines are tied are extremely expensive and they don’t last for more than a year. Government therefore helps

farmers in providing these frames. Now my farm is so big that it costs me Rs.80, 000 to just arrange for the frame. So government provides me half the amount and I pay the other half.”

The reoccurrence of government help in Maske *dada*'s interview was most strikingly different from what Mahars or other communities (like Muslims) had to share about their experiences with changing agrarian practices. Their learning about new agricultural practices was through internal (within the village) sources. They worked on a big farmers' land and learnt what were the profitable crops, how to sow them etc. However, in case of farmers like Maske *dada* there were external sources (government banks, agriculture institutes-both public and private) with the 'know how', who these farmers were accessing or they themselves approached these farmers about upcoming agrarian techniques. These resources were completely unavailable for other communities.

Talking about changing Labour relations and Mahar assertiveness for better wages Maratha landlords used various words to describe Mahar labourers. The most often used word was *badmash* (notorious). Dilip Kashinath Bachute owns 14 acres of land and sows both cash crops and food crops for the market. Although he said he pays Rs.200-250 for male labourers and Rs.150-200 for female labourers, Mahar labourers pressurize him and other farmers to pay equal wages during the grape harvesting season. With the increased need for more labourers on the grape cultivation, it reaches its peak in the last two months before harvesting it, where each fruit and branch has to be carefully selected and cut. It is a tedious process that lasts for many days and big farms need many labourers to continuously work on it. Describing his problem, Dilip Kashinath Bachute said that Mahars know the significance of the 'cutting season' where the entire crop can be spoiled if cutting is delayed. Therefore, they force landholders to pay wages according to their demand. He pointed to another process that has happened in Kamtha, which according to him, Mahars use to trouble farmers. It was the formation of a labour group by all Mahar relatives- "*now they huddle like bees together*". Rejecting their group would mean losing 15-20 local labourers. If he brings labourers from outside he will have to pay for their transportation everyday till the work is over. According to him, Mahar labourers take advantage of this constraint and ask for high wages. Calling them *badmash*, he said they have become greedy for money and they harass farmers. Voicing the same concerns, Ram Krishna Jamdare said that these Mahars came to beg on their doors and now they show arrogance. Accusing

Mahars of stalling growth and progress of the village, he said they don't work as *salgarhi* (indicating that they don't work hard) and blackmail farmers to pay them more. As a result he stopped employing any Mahars on his land. Instead he now employs only *Laman salgarhis* on his farm.

Another Maratha farmer who had previously employed *Laman salgarhis* was Mahadev Maruti Deshmukh. He however, claimed that Mahars were more hard working than *Lamans*. According to him *lamans* were alcoholic and slept a lot. He owned 25 acres in Kamtha and sowed cash and food crops on his land. Talking about changing caste-labour relations in Kamtha he said

“Now you can see how many times I have to call them. But if a farmer has to take care of his land he will do anything. I can't let my crops die. But these people (Mahars) don't understand. Earlier they used to come and ask for work. Even if we did not have much work we would give them something to do- out of humanity because they were poor. But now they cultivate their ½ acre-1 acre and behave like they have become big people. Gareeb se ameer tab bante hain jab sab logon ki izzat karein (one can only come out of poverty and become rich when one learns to respect others). This is how I think caste relations have changed in this village.”

At the same time there were Maratha families in Kamtha that besides having accessibility to certain facilities were not necessarily in the 'dominant' position. Interestingly, these families did not hesitate in working with and more so on Dalit land to earn their daily wages. One such family was woman headed. Her husband had a government job in Nagpur. However, after his death she returned to Kamtha along with her two children and mother-in-law. She shared that she had to earn for her family and that she did not care if she worked on Marathas' land or Mahars'.

The other family that had been working on Dalit land was headed by a man. He owned 2 acres of land and cultivated his land along with working as a wage labourer along with his two sons. Unlike the previous woman's story his family appeared to be more socially secure. However, he said he did not see any problem in working on Mahars' land. He also added that it had no social repercussions on him. And he was free to work wherever he liked. Although they have been working on Maratha's land, they had never entered the *Salgarhi*. And now along with working on their land they work wherever the opportunity to earn appeared.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The launch of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005 had caused a buzz in the academic, policy making, advocacy, and activist circles. It was considered a watershed movement in the attempt of a developing country to ensure minimum level of employability to all eligible adults who staked a claim for it. MGNREGA was sought to ameliorate, at least partially, some of the economic distress of the rural economy and alter the exploitative relations between landless labourers and the landed class. In this process it also had the potential to shape the caste relations by improving the bargaining power of the Dalits and the marginalised groups that mostly constituted the group of landless labourers. Beginning my MPhil in 2010, around 5 years after the launch of the scheme seemed to an opportune time to investigate the impact that the scheme had in altering the bargaining power and the socio-economic relations between the dominant and the dominated caste groups. Based on my familiarity with Kamtha village and awareness of the economic distress that Mahars in the village faced during my rural practicum in my M.A. days and the household survey post it the village seemed the appropriate site to interrogate the efficacy of the scheme on the lives of the Mahars in the village. Especially given the fact that the Mahars had basically two options of employability (migration or work as a wage labour) the scheme seemed to be a sort of intervention required to improve upon their economic condition, albeit only to a limited extent.

But when I commenced my first research field work in September 2011 it was a surprise to observe the non-participation of the Mahars to the extent of a veritable active rejection of the scheme. It was doubly surprising for me, given their economic situation, and their active demand to be included as a beneficiary in other government schemes, so much so that they both understand and demand it as a right. It was this anomaly in their approach towards government schemes that got me thinking regarding their self-perception as a group as well as their contradictory claims towards the state. Instead, I noticed an assertive and self-aware group of people who used multiple strategies to negotiate with diverse locations of power like the state,

landed caste groups, and markets. It was here that my thesis took a turn from its earlier emphasis on studying the participation of Mahars in MNREGA towards understanding what Mahars seek to change, how they work towards bringing that change and what are the setbacks they face in their continuous struggle. Thus, the thesis turned towards understanding the locations and multiple sites of struggle of the Mahars and their continuous engagement to transform their socio-political and economic condition through their own awareness.

Through my field work I became aware that the current understanding on Dalits does not completely capture their existing ground reality. Current understanding on Dalits can be captured largely under two strands: on the one hand focus rests on the political achievement of the Dalits and their empowerment through engagement in the constitutional roles and elections and their socio-economic ‘upliftment’ through affirmative action policies. While on the other hand, literature on caste suggests that Dalits while benefiting from political inclusion still remain relegated to the margins in economic spheres and face caste based atrocities on a regular basis. In this regard, my work, rather than exclusively operating on either strand, claims that both are equally important to understand the continuity of marginality, exclusion, and subordination of Dalits along with their attempts to negotiate, transform, and subvert relations of domination. It is only in the intersection of diverse relations of power at socio-economic and political level along with the co-relative responses that they evoke in the space of daily struggles at multiple levels that one can make sense of the condition of Dalits.

Dalit marginality exists at multiple levels in the domain of economics, politics, and society and in the discourses that seek to maintain and reinforce their conditions of subordination. Such dominant relations are exhibited, replicated, and actualised in everyday relations and control the forms of engagement. The conditions of engagement and appropriate responses to it are also defined by the dominant relations of power. But political empowerment through constitutional mechanisms, a memory of historical struggles for equality, and oral narratives that feed into the self-confidence of Dalits become the alternate sites where everyday response to domination is framed and where alternative discursive strategies emerge that seek to subvert the domination.

The marginality of Dalits and their continuous attempt to subvert existing system of domination makes them a subaltern social group of a Gramscian variety. In this thesis I argued that a closer

reading of the everyday practices and actions of the Mahars in Kamtha village provides sufficient evidence to classify them under the larger category of ‘subalterns’ from a Gramscian perspective; in fact they are a “prototype” of Gramsci’s concept of a ‘subaltern social class’. An analysis of Mahars awareness of their own subordination at multiple levels when equated with their attempts and struggles to overcome dominant caste relations and the resistance they face from dominant caste groups that seeks to systematically stymie any attempts at collectivization and transformation, in this case by the Marathas, is sufficient to classify them as a subaltern group and their politics as subaltern politics.

Mahars in Kamtha continuously engage in political assertion through available social, political, and constitutional spaces to re-imagine a social order that is not layered with discrimination and hierarchies. In this struggle they also align with other subaltern and similarly underprivileged groups like the Muslims to counter the dominant narratives of power. Struggles against caste domination are manifested through attempts to collectivize Dalit groups in celebrations of Ambedkarjayanti and other similar anti-caste platforms, especially during the time of local and state level elections. This has not only enabled them to gain access to political spaces but also transform and democratise it in much deeper and meaningful ways. In the process they manifest not only a belonging to the political space but an attempt to shape it in their narrative. What was to begin with a formal equality, provided by the constitution in terms of political participation and representation, in their hands is moulded as substantive equality. Success in the form of having a Mahar sarpanch has been sought to be replicated in other political spaces too. For instance, having a Mahar sarpanch allows them an easy access to government schemes and to fallow public lands for the purpose of cultivation, as well as playing a decisive role in district and state electoral politics.

These political struggles have been combined with judicial battles to gain access to land which they believe rightly belongs to them. The narratives of lands being surreptitiously taken from them through spurious justification by Brahmins form a strong part of the oral culture handed over generations. Oral stories regarding their present predicament are coupled with equal assertive narratives of a better past and heroes who sought to challenge structures of domination. In such rendering the dominant narrative handed over by the dominant caste groups are sought to be

subverted; this creates an un-coerced space of imagination free of domination that freely associates itself with an anticipated future. Such oral narrative then becomes the site to reclaim a past which has been lost and becomes a space of new found confidence to engage in continuous battle to reclaim lost rights. The process of reimagining past becomes the site where an oppressive narrative of the past is denied, an alternate narrative is imagined that then creates a ground on which political claims for equality can be made; this form of re-imagination of history is the site where individual and collective agency is manifested. This signifies the role that memory, folk tales, and oral history play in the cultural self-understanding of the Mahars. They become a sort of unifying history that binds past and present generations as a unified entity through the continuation of a shared memory of dominance and struggle. Such past then becomes the way of dealing with the present setbacks and strength to create a desirable future. It is here; that Mahars of Kamtha remind us of Gramsci's attached relevance to the folktales as a tool of resistance and empowerment.

However, an attempt to collectivize and form an alliance to counter dominant narratives and structures of power has hit severe roadblocks. The progress of Mahars in the village has often been stalled by dominant Maratha groups, united in their attempts to maintain caste hierarchy and regimes of subordination. One of the common methods employed is that of fragmentation of Mahars as a group. Co-option of Mahar candidates in elections, by offering them money or a membership in the *panchayat* body, is a common strategy employed by the Marathas. This drives a wedge in Mahar solidarity whereby individuals have enough material incentives to break away from their social group in order to serve personal ends. Such defection is symptomatic of the larger struggle that Mahars, and in general Dalits, face in their attempts to form solidarity and control their own narratives. Material deprivation and the lure of individual incentives become a space where counter narratives are sought to be controlled.

Further, Mahars are stymied in their effort to bring about a larger coalition of forces to counter Maratha dominance. This is due to their dependence on them in precarious economic circumstances. While there has been a larger movement towards becoming self-sufficient economically, the absence of re-distributive policies for land has created a cycle of dependency. Many Mahars have migrated in search of better employment opportunities armed with better

education levels in-order to escape their economic lot. These often end up in casual/contractual insecure labour work in urban centres. Other Mahars, who own patches of land, have moved towards cash crops with hopes to gain higher income. But venturing into cash crops is a costly and risky enterprise that is subjected to the vagaries of the monsoon and the unpredictability of the market. A failed monsoon exposes Mahars to risk of un-payable loans and penury. When such is the case, Mahars are left with two options. They either migrate to big cities or neighbouring towns in search of casual labour work or are forced to go back and work on the farms of the Marathas who are large landowners and better equipped to deal with the uncertainties and volatility in the agriculture business. The lack of any state support in the form of agricultural inputs and the continuous distress in agriculture has meant that despite continuous efforts to overcome their economic condition Mahars are subjected to the same dependency relations. Thus, an unpredictable nature, the risks of market, an unsupportive government combine to relegate Mahars to their previous economic state. It is in this space of precarity, that a possibility of fragmentation of collective struggle lies, which is utilised by the Marathas to serve their own interests and maintain dominance. In this regard, the struggles against oppression often end up perpetuating the same relations of dominance. Thus, the progress that Dalits make on the economic and democratic front encounters such fissures, and disables them from creating a lasting change that could potentially reassemble the structures of power.

Thus, a vicious cycle envelops the Mahar struggle. Incremental assertions of change made in one sphere face barriers in other spheres where systemic deprivation persists. It is at the intersection of these spheres, that any effort to understand the perpetuation of dominance has to be understood. It is in the interstices and the interaction of the various spheres that conflict and contradiction emerges between individually held objectives and commonly demanded goals. Calls for change, while being at multiple levels, are often contradictory, with the short term goals often in disharmony with long term goals, or individual goals unable to account to collective ones. Political narratives of transformation are never consistent or coherent but rather fluid and subject to change often failing to account for the intersections and interrelations of the various sites of domination.

Thus, in summary, Mahars in Kamtha present a hard case for existing theories on Dalit politics and empowerment. Moving beyond the existing dichotomies of marginality and empowerment the thesis through an ethnographic reading makes a case for a Gramscian reading of Mahars as a subaltern social group. Mahars rather than existing on either end of the dichotomy co-habit both spaces and continuously negotiate between them. The condition of Mahars of Kamtha can only be understood at the intersection of the various spheres of domination and the correlative and emancipatory responses it evokes from them. Generalizing from this study, one can only make sense of contemporary Dalit struggles by outlining these spheres and the complicated relations between them. Absent these considerations, we would only be staring at a partial picture. It is here that Gramsci provides us with a vocabulary to conceptualise the everyday politics of Dalits in contemporary India.

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